



An Entry with a Bang

PsyckoSama

Information

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Discussion Thread

Earth Orbit, 400 km above Earth – October, 4th 1957

Slowly it moved around on its orbit, the four long antennas slowly swinging out, even two hours after it had been served from the last stage of its R-7 rocket.

Sputnik 1 followed along on its orbit, never even slightly noticing the slight changes around it as it speed over America. Far away from it stars changed alignments in such a way that while they appeared to be the same as always they weren't.

Paranal Observatory, Chile – Monday May, 16th 2005 11.20PM UTC-4

Martin Winters had to suppress a loud yawn as he leaned back in his seat in front of Antu, the first mirror of the VLT, waiting for the image to load up to his system.

He would rather take a closer look to the Magellan Clouds for his latest project, but someone had gotten some time on Antu to do some IR images of an area towards the galactic pane.

Winters sighed, why that was more important than catching some goo images of the recent supernova, he never knew.

Slowly his small finger moved towards his nose, pushing into the right nostril to try and catch that booger that was annoying him for the last hours. As he picked his nose, his eyes fell to the screen and the display on it.

He blinked a few times as he noticed something that shouldn't be there.

His finger still in his right nostril, he leaned forward and looked at the hazy warm blob that was close to the edge of the screen where

nothing should be, somewhere in the general direction of the Moon.

His eyes narrowed as he pulled his finger from his nostril, having managed to catch the booger and his other hand moved to his mouse to zoom in on the warm blob that shouldn't be there.

Slowly the image pulled up from the insane amount of data that originated from Antu.

Winters blinked. Was that a white hot spot inside the blob?

Norad Space Command, USA – Monday May,16th 2005, 9.21PM UTC-6

"What the hell was that?" General David Mathews asked out loud as he glared at the display, while the technicians were working around him.

Whatever it had been just had killed off two Keyhole satellites.

"Looks like an EM Pulse," one of the technicians noted.

Mathews looked over to the technicians and walked up behind him, before taking a glance at the display. It was showing a rather EM spectrum with a very large peak in the middle.

"EMP?" he wondered and looked up at the large display that dominated the far wall of the control room, trying to make out anything that might have caused the Pulse.

The technician nodded.

"It came from the general direction of the Moon, sir."

"Was there anything planned?" he wondered out loud. "Did the Chinese try something with that Probe of theirs?"

Only a few days ago China had launched a Probe to the moon,

officially to take a few imaged for their lunar program, not that they any further than the USA.

"Possible."

Mathews frowned.

"Keep me up," he said and patted the technician on the shoulder, before walking back into his office, trying to get some info from someone else.

Pirate Dropship Drakon
Pirate point between Planet III and IIIa
System S3-19570410
16 May 3020

"Holy mother of God," Captain Burgess Hale whispered. Despite a religious upbringing, he didn't believe in God. His former life as a Federated Suns officer and current life as a pirate had been one long hard scrabble struggle. If God existed, he obviously didn't give a damn about humanity, let alone one disgraced former member of the AFFS.

Only now it looked like God had decided to smile on Hale and his rag tag group of pirates. Here before him was the motherload every pirate dreamed of. Rich enough and heavily industrialized enough to that his people could actually be picky about what they took. And if the smattering of transmissions that they had sampled were anything to go by, primitive enough to be a cake walk.

The only problem was a persistent sense of déjà vu. Hale couldn't help but feel that he had seen this planet somewhere before. But that was impossible. He was in the middle of the Grantville Cluster, a cluster of stars over fifty lightyears across just off the Outworlds Alliance that everyone knew was devoid of any inhabitable worlds. This made the cluster a handy place for pirates to lay low between raids. And that's just what Hale had been doing when they started picking up radio transmissions from this system. On a lark, he had

decided to investigate, hoping for maybe some lost Star League cache.

And it looked like he had hit pay dirt.

"Prep for jumpship separation, boys and girls," he told everyone. "It's party time!"

He took one last look at the planet's image, still haunted by that nagging familiarity. He pushed it to the back of his mind. Whatever it was, it couldn't be important.

Paranal Observatory, Chile – Monday May, 16th 2005 11.30PM UTC-4

Martin Winters all but stared at the display in front of him and the metallic shape in its center. At the moment he was pretty much locked in this location, unable to really think of anything he could do besides stare at it.

The ship that was shown in the center of the image that filled the 22 inch display was cylindric in shape with a rounded bow and several spines extending from the rear. Right at the moment Antu had made the image, the ship had been firing its maneuvering thrusters, illuminating the hull even more.

Next to the larger ship was a smaller object that looked more spherical, a bright glow from its end showing that some sort of engine fired to propel it towards Earth.

"Hey, nice render," he heard a German accented voice behind him. "I didn't know that you're a Battle tech fan."

"Wha?" was Winters intelligent response as he turned around to face Tobias Wamsler.

The nerdy German smirked a little and patted his shoulder, before moving his facer closer to the screen.

"Wow," he made." That's one realistic model of an Invader class."

Winters blinked rapidly a few times and stared at the display, only to move towards Wamsler after a moment.

"Hah?"

Wamsler didn't seem to notice.

"Hoooo," he noted." And that looks like a Union. Look at the battle damage. Wow..."

He turned around to look into the disbelieving face of Winters.

"You really need to tell me where you found it. DeviantArt?"

Winters stared some more, before his hand automatically moved to his mouse, zooming the image out and showing it in the controls of Antu.

Wamsler blinked. And blinked again.

"You mean..." he began turning towards Winters, who simply nodded.

"Oh frack..."

Washington DC
United States of America
Earth
16 May 2005, 11:45pm EST

President Jack Ryan Sir. fought a yawn as he sat in the situation room. Slowly his eyes glazed over the room, taking in his various staff members. He didn't know what was going on, but it had to be damned important. He'd just gotten back from a week long visit to China to normalize relations with the new, more democratic, government and was very tired. He'd never found it easy to deal with

long flights, and after 13 hours of jetlag and a 15 hour flight to sleep of he'd asked everyone to let this sleeping dog lie. Part of him was annoyed, but he also knew that this was probably damned important. The Joint Chiefs all were dancing in their seats like nervous school kids and MP looked like she was about to pass a diamond. It could almost be described as funny if it wasn't so foreboding. Taking a deep breath he began the meeting.

"Alright, tell me what we're looking at."

"At 11.20PM Eastern Standard time NORD detected a massive electromagnetic burst at the Lagrange Point between Earth and the Moon," The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff began, "This has been confirmed by the Paranal Observatory in Chile. They've also taken pictures of a pair of unidentified flying objects. The larger of which is a roughly cylindrical shape approximately five hundred in length. The smaller is a spherical craft eighty meters wide. It is expected to reach Low Earth Orbit in three hours."

"Wait a moment," Jack cut in. "This better not be some kind of prank on the president. He knew that they'd never do such a thing, but even that seemed more likely than aliens. "Craft? Are you sure?"

"Both shapes are obvious artificial. The larger of the two craft has hence deployed what looks to be a massive Solar Array while the smaller of the two detached from the larger and is making use of what spectrographic analysis has deemed to be a pure hydrogen fusion reaction for propulsion."

Jack frowned and said the only thing that he could even think of in response. "Aliens."

"Looks like it, sir, but it gets stranger."

The PotUS smiled wearily. "I think that the only way that things could get any stranger is if the Second Coming of Christ walked through the Door and introduced himself like Fonzie."

Muted laughter filled the room. "Sir, the images from Paranal are on

your desk. We haven't received any others yet, but NASA says that they're putting the Hubble right on it, and its my guess that by the end of the night every telescope on the planet is going to be looking at it," the Chairman paused for a moment, "The people from Paranal attached several images that make things entire situation just that much more confusing."

"Such as?"

"Look for yourself sir."

The President nodded and opened the file before him and looked through the file before him. The two UFOs seemed very familiar to him and he didn't know why. As strange as it seemed it was like he'd seen them before somewhere. Shaking his head he continued to look through the file until he reached scans from of all things, a war gaming book. One he'd once owned to be exact. Battletech Technical Readouts of the Union Class Dropship and the Invader class Jumpship. Two entirely fictional images that exactly matched the two ships now in High Earth Orbit.

It has been years since he'd played the game. It was something he'd left behind once he'd been promoted in the Agency and no longer had time for. Jack Ryan looked at the others and nodded slightly. "Things have gotten stranger," He admitted. "Bring us to DEFCON 2." He paused for a moment, "And get Sally and Jack Jr. in here."

Norad Space Command, USA – Monday May,17th 2005, 3.01PM UTC-6

General David Mathews stared at the large situation room display. The smaller of the alien spaceships had just finished its second orbit around Earth and had yet to do more than just that.

He shook his head, wondering what the heck the CIC was thinking. He couldn't actually believe that they were dealing with something straight out of science fiction, did he? Okay, perhaps this was a little science fiction, with a honest to god space ship just appearing close

to the moon and a second one going into Earth orbit.

Of course he had voiced his thoughts, when he heard about the CICs thoughts from the Pentagon. And someone had pointed out that according to the doppler radar, the spheric ship was moving at one Earth gravity.

To Mathews that didn't mean much. That those aliens moved with a constant acceleration however did. It just showed how far advanced they were.

"Sir," he was broken from his thoughts." The Dropship is breaking orbit."

He frowned at the technician. After hearing what they were apparently tracking, they had taken to call it the 'Dropship', even if that just could not be.

He looked up at the display again. At first he had hoped that it would go back to where it came from, but it seemed that it was going to deorbit over the Pacific.

"Any idea where it will go down?"

"Hard to tell," was his answer. "It could be nearly anywhere, with those engines they could take a longer flight at hypersonic speeds..."

Pirate Dropship Drakon - Briefing Room

One hour to Entry

System S3-19570410

16 May 3020

Captain Hale swept his eyes over the assembled. To his left, his "Intelligence Officer" and captain of the Drakon, Reynold Mamoto was still listening to a muted audio stream.

On his right Mechwarriors Tony Denaro, owner of one Commando, and Ken, the Stinger pilot, the were playing dice with infantry boss Leutnant Irdon Koltan. The third Mechwarrior, Dana Zumross, was

absent, probably tinkering with her Hermes II as usual. Just as well, so long as she got to burn something, she was happy.

"Let's start, Reynold. You had 3 hours to find me some targets." Hales opened the briefing.

"This world is heavily industrialised, but practically undefended. There are no orbital defense installations, no fortresses. I've found some militia installation, but there is no trace of a Mech base. We can just drop down and choose what we want.

They use some exotic codecs, but we had a good deal of them on file. From the intercepted transmissions there are no signs they have noticed us yet or that they are even looking. They seem to have forgotten all about space travel.

Pirate Dropship Drakon - Bridge
Low Orbit of planet III
System S3-19570410
17 May 3020

"Man, look at all this junk," Hugo Chin, pilot of the Drakon, said as he maneuvered the Dropship into orbit above the unnamed planet. "I've never seen so many satellites orbiting a rock in all my life. I don't think even New Avalon or any of the other House capitals have this much stuff, not since the Second Succession War anyway."

"Big deal," snorted sensors officer Jane Dietrich. "It's all little stuff, com sats and stuff."

"You know, we could fill our holds with just the stuff sitting up here and still make a profit," Chin speculated.

"What, Hugo? And forgo the pleasure of having solid ground under our feet and something other than canned air to breath?" Captain Mamoto said as he propelled himself onto the bridge in the microgravity environment. "Besides, we're not exactly well stocked with vac suits. Who exactly is going to do the EVA to grab a bunch of satellites? Our esteemed mechwarriors in their mechs?"

Chin shrugged. "I was just saying, skipper..."

"Never you mind that," Mamoto said, ending the dialogue. "Jane, any signs that they've noticed us?"

"You mean other than being pinged by several dozen radar sources practically since we detached from the Elephant?" Jane said sarcastically. "Noooo, none at all, skipper."

"Oh, good," Mamoto said, completely oblivious to the sarcasm. "Okay, Hugo, take us down. We're going with landing point C."

NORAD Space Command
United States of America
Earth
17 May 2005

"No effing way," muttered Lieutenant Thomas Warner as he stared at the first high resolution photographs of the alien intruder from the spy satellites in orbit. He had been hearing outrageous rumors about the alien spacecraft coming it, but he hadn't believed them. The similarity of the alien bogey to any fictional spacecraft couldn't be anything but a coincidence. Then he saw these pictures.

The spherical ship looked beat up and worn, its paintjob scored with what looked like burn marks and minor cratering. But even so, Warner could make out the faded insignia painted on the side, a red and gold sunburst with an upright sword across it. On top of the logo was a more freshly painted black X that appeared to have been hand drawn. But what really drew Warner's eyes were the blocky English style lettering and numbering adorning the hull.

"General!"

Bridge

U.S.S. Nimitz
Pacific Theater
Earth
17 May 2005

"They can't be serious," Admiral Roger Corman said as he stared at the printout of the message from PACCOM.

"Sir?" Captain Ben Grayson, the Nimitz's nominal CO, said. "What's going on?"

"We're being ordered to prepare for a ground strike with heavy air cover in New Zealand," Corman replied.

"But that's sixteen hundred miles away," Grayson protested. "That's barely inside the operational range of our Hornets. And why are we attacking New Zealand anyway?"

"We're not," Corman said disgustedly. "According to this," he waved the message, "New Zealand is about to be invaded by aliens and we're the closest carrier group that can respond."

"No offense, sir, but this has got to be a joke," Grayson said doubtfully.

"Joke or not, we have our orders," Corman replied. "Prep the strike, Captain. In the meantime, I'm calling PACCOM and confirming our orders."

Cornwall Park
Aukland, New Zealand
Earth

It was a beautiful and sunny day for the people visiting Cornwall Park that day. The first thing most people noticed was the distant roar not unlike that from a jet plane, if a little deeper than normal. Some people looked up and saw a brilliant spot of light that appeared to not be moving very much unlike most jets. But the light grew

brighter, attracted more attention from people on the ground. And as the light and sound grew unbearable, a hot wind began to pick up and it slowly dawned on the onlookers that the whatever-it-was was descending towards them.

At first one by one and then soon in a mass stampede, people began running away from the descending UFO. Most of them even survived.

The Dropship Drakon landed in the park. The column of fusion fire underneath it brought the thirty five hundred ton vessel to a soft landing, its power digging out a crater in the dirt beneath it and utterly annihilating any living thing unfortunate enough to be caught there.

Dropship Drakon

17 May 3020

"Touchdown in thirty seconds," Mamoto's voice said over the intercom.

"Why an island?" Mechwarrior Dana Zumross said suddenly as she sat in the cockpit of her Hermes II.

"What?" someone else said, confused.

"Why are we landing on an island," Dana asked again. "Why not on the mainland near richer pickings? Why a rinky dink island in the middle of nowhere?"

"Well, darling," Ken, the Stinger pilot replied, "if you actually bothered to come to the meetings, then you'd know, wouldn't you?"

"Stuff it, dickwad.," Dana told him, annoyed. "Just tell me."

"Twenty seconds," Mamoto said.

"It's simple really," Hale broke in before the two began squabbling. "Despite being a 'rinky dink little island', the target I have in mind has

enough loot sitting in the open that we could stuff the Drak's holds full and still not get everything."

"Ten seconds, Nine..."

"And besides," Hale continued, ignoring the countdown, "there's only the one militia base in the area. Now we can probably handle anything the locals can throw at us, but we're not exactly drowning in spares as is, so I want the damage to our mechs minimized."

"...three, two..."

"Gotcha boss."

"...touchdown!" Mamoto cried as the muted engine roar cut off.

The mechwarriors could all feel the Drakon settle down gently... and then lurch violently to the side. Luckily, the mechs were all still in their cradles, so they weren't tossed around like giant rag dolls. A few seconds of mass cursings filled the comm channels during which Hale noticed that the floor of the bay was now a thirty degree slope.

"Mamoto, what the hell happened?" Hale demanded furiously.

"Er, sorry about that," Mamoto replied. "Apparently the ground isn't as solid as it looks. I think one of my landing feet is in a sewer. But don't worry! The doors are clear and we can take off again with no problem."

"We better," Hale growled. "Okay, open the doors and let us out."

The mech cradle released Hale's Hunchback, and he carefully piloted it across the now uneven floor to the opening hatch. As he stepped outside, Hale was followed by the rest of his lance. The ground and some of the nearer building appeared to have been damaged by the Dropship's landing, but there were no militia forces to greet him. That was good.

"Okay people, let's do this by the numbers," Hale said once the quick spot check was done. "The target area is roughly north of the LZ."

Form up on me and..." The other three mechs of his lance dashed past him at their best speeds. "Dammit!"

As he put his bigger and slower mech into a run after his errant pilots, Hale decided that he really needed to work on unit discipline. He was just glad that his choice of targets was unlikely to kill his people for their stupidity.

May 17, 2005
Auckland, New Zealand

"You know, this is absolutely the last time I volunteer for an easy Annual Training in a friendly country" Sergeant Tony Dansel remarked as he watched the Mechs stomp across the port facility while the detachment he had ended up in charge of cowered behind a building. "Oh, and all of you who have ever given me shit for what I read owe me a dozen drinks."

"What, just because you read about giant robots?" Private Jim Johnson said snidely.

"No, because I read about *these* giant robots. It's sure as hell not a publicity stunt or anything cooked up on Earth, because you could feel the ground shake when that thing touched down, and no one has anything that big that can do reentry like that. So the simplest explanation is probably some combination of an alternate universe and time travel. Well, maybe aliens with a perverse sense of humor" Dansel said, as he continued trying to dial anyone in his chain of command.

"Simplest?!"

"What do you know anyone today who has giant robots, with beam weapons like what took out that news copter, that happen to look like a kludge of two separate Japanese animation franchises that were used wholesale as the basis for a board game? Oh well, on to practicalities. Anyone manage to get through to higher?"

A chorus of negative replies ensued with a sarcastic follow up "Nope, they said they're in a meeting holed up in the TOC before they left for the day. Of course, no one told them that isn't supposed to stand for Teenagers Only Club."

"Naturally. And our weapons are still back at the barracks, without ammo, and wouldn't dent those things anyway. It's a shame really, these jerks are so spread out they can't really cover each other. Why couldn't this have happened next week when the Cav brigade would be here?"

"You have a clue what's going on then mate?" A quiet voice breathed in Dansel's ear. He turned around to find a dozen men in urban camo, not quite pointing their weapons at his people.

"Only about as much as your average intel puke probably. From their actions, they're hostile, from their numbers, equipment, and poorly painted over insignia, some kind of pirates, probably mostly independent. I don't suppose any of you are familiar with Battletech?"

The smallest of the newcomers piped up "What, like that Mechwarrior computer game?"

"Exactly. Giant Robots, distant future, sucks even more than usual to be infantry. Your best bet would probably be to use explosives on any leg joint you can reach. Only trouble is the whole getting spotted and dying bit. Well that, and my people don't have explosives, training, or a surplus of balls. Sergeant Dansel, US Army Reserve by the way."

"Captain Lewis, Australian SAS. I think we might be able to provide the last three. Your bollocks shortage wouldn't extend to covering a distraction perchance?"

"Well Captain, that depends on how much expensive equipment we can get away with breaking."

May 17, 2005

Auckland, New Zealand

Northern Motorway

Gloria Freeman gaped at the sight of the sight of the soldiers grouping up alongside the side of the mptprway.

"What do you think they're doing, Neddy?"

He looked at them as they jumped over the edge of the edge, ropes trailing behind them.

"I don't know. Training?"

A loud bang emanated from beneath them.

"Jesus," she swore. "What are they doing?"

Looking out the window into the park, she swore again as she saw the giant robots in the park turning to look at the freeway.

"Jesus!"

One of them opened fire on the freeway, blasting holes through the road with its lasers, and reducing a car in front of them to pieces.

"Jesus, Neddy!"

She pressed down hard on the accellerator, trying to get away from the sounds of fighting as soon as possible.

"Oh, Jesus!"

This should go before the scene of Paranal Observatory IDing the ships:

evilauthor said:

Pirate Dropship *Drakon*

Pirate point between Planet III and IIIa

System S3-19570410

16 May 3020

"Holy mother of God," Captain Burgess Hale whispered. Despite a religious upbringing, he didn't believe in God. His former life as a Federated Suns officer and current life as a pirate had been one long hard scrabble struggle. If God existed, he obviously didn't give a damn about humanity, let alone one disgraced former member of the AFFS.

Only now it looked like God had decided to smile on Hale and his rag tag group of pirates. Here before him was the motherload every pirate dreamed of. Rich enough and heavily industrialized enough to that his people could actually be picky about what they took. And if the smattering of transmissions that they had sampled were anything to go by, primitive enough to be a cake walk.

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And it looked like he had hit pay dirt.

"Prep for jumpship separation, boys and girls," he told everyone. "It's party time!"

He took one last look at the planet's image, still haunted by that nagging familiarity. He pushed it to the back of his mind. Whatever it was, it couldn't be important.

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May 17 2005
Auckland New Zealand

"Sky-eye here. He's moved as far as he probably will for area security. Initiate SCV rush. Over." SGT Dansel said into the walkie-talkie, as he observed from his perch 150 feet off the ground in the control box of a gantry crane.

In the nearest motor pool, rumblings could be heard as the engines of ten, then twenty, then thirty massive vehicles started up in rapid succession. There had been locks on the gate, which had lasted seconds in the face of the bolt cutters the Aussie SAS kept with them as a matter of course. There had been locks on each steering wheel, which didn't matter, since the vehicles were already pointed towards the docks, and weren't meant to be steered in any case. There was a lock-out key for each vehicle secured back at the TOC that was needed to activate them, but anyone with three months of experience in the unit knew how there were never enough of them on hand, and that a bent piece of coat hangar would substitute. Their was fence around the motor pool, that was barely higher than the tires of each slowly accelerating juggernaut, and flattened to the ground without slowing the horde at all.

'Corporal' Jankowicz was bored. There had been no resistance worth mentioning, and none at all in his sector. He couldn't even try to loot anything shiny for himself, the support personnel was taking care of that far behind him. So when his sensors lit up with anomalous contacts in motion, it was with an exuberant wordless shout that he moved his *Stinger* out to get a look.

"Sky-eye to team 2, Initiate Pratfall. Bollocks Brigade, on your own initiative. Over."

As he moved forward, Jankowicz belatedly remembered to report back to the *Drakon*. "Jankowicz here, I've got major movement in my sector, taking a look-see. Coming up on- Holy crap what the hell are those things?! There's a heavy armor battalion like nothing I've ever seen bearing right down on me with huge frakking cannon! Send

everyone, or..... huh, never mind, some joker sent a bunch of frak-off huge support vehicles my way. That thing on the front just looked like a huge gun for a sec. Damn but they blow up pretty though." Entranced as he was with seeing how quickly he could tear up the targets, he failed to notice the minute figures between the buildings on either side of the road dumping out crates and barrels, then dragging cables across the path with hastily tossed ropes.

"Jankowicz, get the hell back in position. Look sharp everyone, looks like someone was trying to draw our attention over his way. Jankowicz I mean *Now!*" Hale resolved at that moment that he was pulling that irresponsible jack-ass from piloting just as soon as they were off-world.

"Yeah yeah, Cap, resuming position you butt residing anal monkey" Jankowicz muttered as he back pedaled, unwilling to leave the last two targets active. Playing his laser across both with a single continuous beam, he turned and accelerated down the road. He first noticed something wrong as the left foot of his mech started to slide forward, trying to compensate with the right leg, he felt something crunch underfoot as his mech lurched off-balance. As he entered an uncontrolled skid forwards, with commendable reflexes he triggered his jump jets to try to get clear. Unfortunately, his mech's feet had by then slid under the replacement cable for the gantry crane, turning what would otherwise have been a brilliant save into a headlong tumbling sprawl as the jumpjets scraped him into and along the asphalt.

"Go go go go go" Dansel chanted, willing the commandos forward as he moved the gantry towards the fallen mech. *Let's see that piece of crap get up with no legs and a forty ton container on its chest.* The Aussies practically flew to the mech, each two man team flawlessly shoving their payload into the closest leg joint or seam. As they dived for what cover was available, a series of staccato bursts rang out as the improvised satchel charges detonated, momentarily obscuring the fallen war machine. As the smoke cleared though, it was apparent that though much the worse for wear, and in fact with one foot entirely detached, the mech was still functional, and in fact already rising from the ground "...Well drat. Oh drat it all to *heck!*"

One of the SAS pairs had drawn Murphy's ire, as randomly ricocheting shrapnel had been practically funneled towards them by the curvature of the mech. Even with the less wounded man carrying the other, they were still in the open, and entirely too far from any kind of concealment. Without conscious thought, Dansel did the three things he had been explicitly instructed never to allow anyone to do with one of those cranes, accelerating it to more than twice its official top speed. Of course, to put that in perspective, it was still a pace that a running man could easily outperform.

Jankowski was in a foul mood, and more than a little dazed. *On my first mission with a mech, these worthless shits tear the whole mech up! I'll be lucky if Hale just leaves me to die here. Oh hey, a couple squishies didn't make it away. That's right little bloodbags, try to get away from me, I'm going to.... what's that rumbling sound?*

As he turned his mech towards the noise, Jankowski's first reaction was controlled panic at the F-ing huge monstrosity bearing down on him. His second reaction was barely controlled panic as he saw the container lovingly positioned at precisely his *Stinger's* head height. His third reaction was uncontrolled panic upon realizing that all of his leg actuators were flashing danger signals and that the thing was taller than his surviving jump jets could clear in time. His fourth reaction was hysterical sobbing as he realized that the container was actually correcting for his movements. His fifth, and least helpful reaction, was to fire everything he had as it bore on the thing as he continued to turn.

A mobile dockyard gantry crane, even a relatively small one like this one, intended solely for lifting at most a forty foot container of no more than two hundred tons, was a massive structure. Its legs had to be solid, incredibly heavy metal just to support its 200 foot height sitting still, much less while in motion, or still worse in motion with the boom lowered and a load suspended. It was over-engineered to withstand almost any plausible circumstance, up to and including hurricanes, because such a crane represented an immense capital investment that would have to survive for years to pay for itself, and preferably decades to allow for ongoing profit. However, when the designers had tried to cover their bases, hostile heavy weapons fire

had been low on their list of crucial factors(though it must be said that most had idly speculated at some point on how to most efficiently undo all their work). Hostile fire by a directed energy weapon designed to slice through advanced armor composites like butter hadn't remotely crossed their minds.

As such, Jankowski's laser had nearly effortlessly sliced through the majority of the leg closest to him, and his heavy machine guns, while not nearly so dramatic in effect, still didn't do the integrity of the crane any good at all, a problem that was compounded as the crane continued to move forward, further stressing already critically damaged structure. As it began to buckle towards him, Jankowski's spatial awareness and centers for logical analysis collaborated to belatedly inform him that there had been more than enough room under the thing for it to go by, and he could always have thrown up an arm to ward off the improvised projectile. This proved to be no comfort whatsoever as the structure descended upon his mech even as he tried to hobble clear.

When the crane first started to buckle, Dansel had scrambled up the ladder from the underslung control booth fast enough to have set a world record had anyone been properly recording the event. Any hope of an open casket hero's funeral would at the very least require him not to be under the majority of the structure in an easily crushed space. As he reached the top-mounted engine room and paused for lack of a better idea, he briefly mulled over his options for an exit line *Dramatic declamation?*, *A last laugh?* *Obscure geek reference?* *Guess I'll go with understated.*

As the rear legs of the crane tore off their rails and it accelerated towards the ground and the intervening twenty ton speedbump, the previously distributed hand held radios crackled to life. "It's been an honor gentlemen. Skye-eye, out."

Cast of Characters

-Earth- Located in System S3-19570401 as listed in Battletech star charts

Politicians:

Jack Ryan Sr, President - President of the United States

Military:

Currently unnamed - Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Roger Corman, Admiral - CO of USS Nimitz carrier group

Ben Grayson, Captain - CO of the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier

David Matthews, General - Norad Space Command (CO?)

Martin "Triple M" McMayers, Brigadier General - Air Force, not one of Joint Chiefs, plays Battletech

Lewis, Captain - Australian SAS in Auckland, New Zealand

Antony Winton, Captain - New Zealand SAS attached to Rainbow 6

Michael Arrigo, Captain - New Zealand SAS attached to Rainbow 6

Thomas Warner, Lieutenant - Norad officer, works with satellites

Tony Dandel, Sergeant - US Army Reserve soldier on leave in Auckland, New Zealand, crane driver

Jim Johnson, Private - US Army Reserve soldier on leave in Auckland, New Zealand

John Clark - member of Rainbow 6

"Ding" - member of Rainbow 6

Civilians:

Martin Winters - Astronomer at Paranal Observatory, Chile

Tobias Wamsler - Astronomer at Paranal Observatory, Chile. German National, Battletech fan

Gloria Freeman - Random fleeing civilian

"Neddy" - Random civilian in Gloria Freeman's car

Jack Ryan Jr - son of President Ryan, high school student, Battletech "expert"

Sally Ryan - daughter of President Ryan, Battletech "expert"

???

Arnold Van Damm - presumably works in the White House

-Battletech-

Pirates Lance:

Burgess Hale, Captain - Lance leader, pilots Hunchback

Dana Zumross, Mechwarrior - Hermes II pilot, likes to tinker with machines

Ken Jankowicz - Stinger pilot

Tony Denaro - Commando pilot

Dropship Drakon Crew:

Mamoto, Captain - Captain of the pirate dropship Drakon and "intel specialist" of dubious ability

Hugo Chin - Pilot of the Drakon

Jane Dietrich - Sensors officer of the Drakon

Other:

Irdon Koltan, Leutnant - Drakon infantry commander

Other Notes:

* The first Pirate jumpship is an Invader class (~500 meters long, 3 docking collars) and has been referred to as "the Elephant", although this is not necessarily its full or even actual name.

* The USS Nimitz is about 1600 miles from New Zealand, which is just inside its F/A-18 Hornets' strike range (presumably round trip). Anyone know how long it would take the Hornets to get there? (Speed of plot aside of course)

* Edit 1: 1 July 2009 - removed "on leave" from US Army Reserve personnel.

* Edit 2: 1 July 2009 - Tony Denaro and Irdon Koltan added to Battletech section

* Edit 3: 2 July 2009 - added MacMayers, Rainbow 6 personnel, and the Ryan kids

The part with the crane was priceless.

Massive thumbs-up, keep going with it.

points at the discussion thread

Ferguson's Port
Auckland, New Zealand
Earth
17 May 2005/3020

Hale couldn't see Jankowicz's Stinger over the cornucopia of stacked shipping containers from where he was. That was part of the reason he had deployed him over there; to keep an eye on their blind spots. But Hale could hear his man scream in terror over the radio only to be abruptly cut off. And that the cut off occurring at the same time as the big crane that Hale could see coming down did not bode well.

"Jankowicz! Status report!" Hale demanded as he negotiated his way around the stacks toward his location. "Jankowicz! Answer me!"

"I'm... I'm okay," came the Mechwarrior's shaky voice. "Oh God, I'm stuck. Hatch is jammed shut and the damage board is a all red and yellow lights. I don't think I could get the Stinger standing even if I weren't buried alive."

"Buried alive?" Hale said incredulously. "What the hell are you... Holy shit!"

The giant crane was an almost unrecognizable mound of twisted metal. Nothing under it could be seen. The only reason Hale could tell the Stinger was under there was that the very tip of its rifle-like medium laser was poking up from the wreckage. Assuming that arm was still attached to the rest of the mech, Jankowicz's ride must be lying flat on the pavement with ALL that wreckage on top of him.

Extracting the Stinger could be a problem. While Hale had no doubt that his own lasers could slice the tangle of structural supports like so much butter, he risked doing further damage to the other Mech. Mechs were goddamned expensive and Stingers carried ammo that would explode if it were hit. That meant that he needed to do this manually.

"Jankowicz you dumb ass," Hale growled as he started his Hunchback forward. "The repairs to that Stinger is coming out of your cut and..."

what the hell?"

Hale brought his mech to a complete halt just as it started to lose its balance and managed to stay upright. Looking down, he saw that the ground was crisscrossed with cables suspended at ankle height. If he had been going at any speed, Hale almost certainly would have tripped and fallen. Movement out of the corner of his eye drew his attention.

"Son of a bitch!" Hale yelled, firing his left arm laser at a man carrying a suspicious looking package. He missed, the man ducking out of sight and his laser blasting a hole in a nearby shipping container. Hopefully, shrapnel from the container nailed the guy, but Hale didn't have time for that. "Koltan! We got enemy infantry in the area! What's your status?"

"Almost done, Burg," came the instant reply. "You need my people to sweep the area?"

"No, get back to Drakon with the loot," Hale decided. Decisions, decisions. He couldn't leave the loot unguarded, but he couldn't dig Jankowicz out with an unknown number of infantry sappers in the area, and God only knew how many OTHER infantry might be laying in wait for the convoy. So he needed one mech to cover his PBIs and another to watch his back and help him dig out the Stinger. With the Stinger down, the only real anti-infantry weapon left in the Mech lance was Zumross' flamer...

Hale's eyes drifted over the wreckage, and noticed what looked suspiciously like fuel leaking from what looked suspiciously like a fuel tank, creating a rather large puddle where the Stinger was probably lying.

"Zumross, stay with Koltan and make sure he and the loot gets back to the Drakon," Hale ordered as he took careful aim with his right hand laser and making damn sure that his target was nowhere near the spread pool of flammable fuel.

"Will do, boss," the woman acknowledged almost cheerfully. No surprise there; it wasn't like there was any love lost between her and

Jankowicz.

"Denaro," Hale continued as he cut one trip cable with a laser shot.
"Your Commando has tow hands. Get over here and watch my back."

"On my way."

Movement caught Hale's eye. He lashed out with both lasers this time. He couldn't tell if he hit what he shot at. Keeping one eye on the surroundings, he went back to cutting more cables while swearing under his breath.

This was supposed to have been a no cost milk run. Now he was wondering if he were going to break even.

White House Situation Room
Washington DC
United States of America
Earth
17th May 2005, 4.03am EST

"I begin to understand why everyone say that CNN gets to everything first," Arnold van Damm noted dryly.

The large plasma TV display on the far wall of the Situation Room was turned on, showing what CNN was transmitting just about now, allowing everyone on Earth to see what happened in Auckland, New Zealand. Wobbly and slightly grainy images taken by a hand camera were coming from the local Auckland CNN office, showing what was going on at Ferguson's Port.

Next to the frame of CNN, was an overhead life feed coming from a redirected Keyhole satellite showed the whole scene from above.

Aside from Arnie van Damm, Jack Ryan sr., Jack Ryan jr., Sally Ryan and the joint Chiefs of Staff were looking at the images. Jack jr, leafing through one of the many softcover books that littered the conference table of the situation room. Much like his sister and a good number of the Generals, he looked a little worse to wear from the unexpected situation.

Grabbing a can of highly caffeinated sparkly deverage, he downed it in one go.

"Okay, we can add a Hunchback to the list," he noted, shook his head clear, before rubbing his face.

Part of him wanted to go to bed, while another part was glad that he had a watertight excuse for not going to high school at this day, and yet another being thrilled with the prospect of real life Mechs, through he was aware of the problems. It had its perks of being the son of the PotUS and being able to sniff around in military hardware books.

But he didn't care much, as Mechs were cool.

"That makes a Stinger, a Hunchback and a Commando," Air Force Brigadier General Martin 'Tripple M' McMayers said. "That's what? Two light and one Medium mech?"

McMayers wasn't in the Joint Chiefs, but he had come to the group as being someone who openly admitted to play Battletech in his spare time.

"And a Hermes II," was Sally Ryan's addition after throwing her Battletech Sourcebook on the table.

"Two medium and two light mechs," Jack Ryan sr. said finally. "A scouting force?"

"Could as well be pirates," McMayers said with a shake of his head.

Most of the other people in the room looked at them the same way a normal user looks at computer geeks talking shop, even while some of them were working through the sourcebooks on the table.

"What about the emblem on the Dropship?" Sally wondered. "Its a Federated Suns dropship."

"You can throw a stone into the Inner Sphere without hitting a Union..." McMayers noted, "The same goes for the Invader."

"The question is still open," Jack sr. noted. "Pirates or FedSun scouts."

"The way they are hauling loot, I'd say pirates..."

"Lets hope they are not burning down Auckland..."

BRIEFING ROOM

RAINBOW HOME BASE

While Sally and Jack Jr. were working nonstop in the White House situation room, others were having their own problems with the universe. John Clark - along with the rest of the Rainbow team - was staring at the plasma tv in the briefing room in openmouthed astonishment and an incredulity level that felt like it was trying to achieve high orbit. Well, Ding and a few others were imitating landed fish, Clark settled for eyes that looked like they were in danger of rolling out of their sockets. Reality had apparently decided to take an unscheduled sabbatical, because of the many things he had expected to happen this week, an extraterrestrial invasion by giant walking tanks straight out of an incredibly successful series of games had *not* been one of them.

One of the problems - if you could call it a problem - with being a highly effective counterterrorist unit was that the stupid terrorists died off quickly, and the smart ones knew better than to risk going up against someone who had a near-flawless track record of annihilating whoever they tangled with. This meant that Rainbow hadn't seen much action lately, and rigorous training exercises did little to keep them from getting very, very, *bored*.

Of the various methods used to stave off the ever-encroaching fiend known as boredom, one of the most effective was prominently displayed in the rec-room. A long line of video game consoles with a vast assortment of games to go with them, and, as luck would have it, that assortment included several games with Mechwarrior in their title.

After ten minutes of watching a group of honest-to-god *Battlemechs* rampaging their merry way through the Auckland port district, everyone present silently agreed that boredom was looking more preferable every passing moment. Especially with the two newest members of the team standing in the middle of the room, radiating a helpless fury that anyone with combat experience could feel throughout the building.

Captains Antony Winton and Michael Arrigo of the New Zealand S.A.S had joined Rainbow barely three weeks ago, and were now watching the assault on their homeland from the other side of the planet, unable to do anything to help fight off the invaders. Even watching one of the 'mechs - a *Stinger*, according to some of the intel geeks - buried under a load of shipping crates and their accompanying crane was a cold comfort to them, knowing that dozens - if not hundreds - of the people they had sworn an oath to defend were being callously murdered.

And just to put the icing on the cake - if one could call a steaming pile of maggot-infested shit *cake* - the attackers looked like they were hauling off anything that looked valuable, meaning this unprovoked attack was motivated by nothing more than the ugliest form of *greed*.

Everyone in the room knew that this craven act would not be forgotten, and it would *never* be forgiven. The following decades would prove them right, as the soldiers of New Zealand became legendary for hunting down and killing anyone who backed pirate raids, no matter how rich, powerful, or important they were. An unstoppable tide that no amount of influence could protect you from, ANZAC became the monster that haunted the dreams of the corrupt, lurking in the shadows, waiting to turn dreams - into *nightmares*.

(Author Note - Hope I did good!



)

A little heavy on the foreshadowing but not bad.
Please cut that line break down by half though.

Warringer said:

points at the discussion thread

[Click to expand...](#)

[Click to shrink...](#)

Need I say more? Please don't clutter this one, we do have a dedicated discussion thread as well.



Small town,
Manawatu region of North Island
New Zealand
Earth
19:58 local (03:58 EST), Tuesday 17 May 2005/3020

What's the bird on-deck for tomorrow's FotW, again? That's right: the Issus. Another of those overgunned, under-armoured suicide sleds the Clanners run. He was already turning the basic stats of the 'Fighter of the Week' over in his head as he turned off the car and headed inside, a shopping bag hanging from one hand. *Have to fire up HM:A to check out the fluff and turn the review into a story, rather than just stats....*

"Hey, Mum," he nodded, heading through the kitchen to drop his groceries on the table. "So, what's gone wrong in the world since I went to work?"

His mother blinked her eyes open and sat up on the couch, reaching for the TV remote. "I don't know, love, but we'll see in a minute."

He came around the corner of the dividing-wall into the living-room as the familiar jingle of the CNN hourly news faded... and blinked hard as he saw the inset behind Ralitsa Vassileva, and the blazing banner headline {BATTLEMECH RAID IN PROGRESS}. *What the - did someone hack their ticker, or something?* The poor woman above that banner looked like someone had thwapped her with a carp when they handed her the latest pages.

{"Welcome back to CNN and our continuing live coverage of today's breaking news: an incredible occurrence in Auckland, New Zealand, where a group of 'BattleMechs' are attacking the city's extensive port facilities."}

An unopened bottle of soft-drink thudded to the carpet. "No. Fucking. WAY!" *A fucking 'Mech raid - on EARTH in REAL LIFE?*

"Isn't... isn't that one of your...?" his mother gaped.

{"The attackers emerged from a 'DropShip' which landed near

Ferguson's Port almost ninety minutes ago."} The anchor and still-picture inset vanished, in favour of shaky live footage: a blocky 'Mech looming over a pile of twisted metal wreckage, pivoting and occasionally firing at something amongst the containers, the after-images of the beams from its arm-mounted lasers clear against the night. {"CNN has been unable to obtain any comment from New Zealand government officials as yet -"}

Fucking Hunchback. Man, if someone's hoaxing CNN... "Yeah, Mum, I think it is," he said slowly - and bolted for the house's office, almost tripping headlong over his chair in his scramble to switch on his computer, snatch a trio of books and a sheaf of print-outs from his shelf, then dash back into the living-room. As he came back, other footage was coming up: the spheroid ship descending from the post-dusk darkness atop a bright column of fusion flame. "... Davions!?!?" he blurted.

"What's going ON?" his mother gasped.

"Question of the day, that," he murmured sardonically, flipping through the printouts, half-listening to the day's now-second story as he hunted the reference he wanted. *Dammit, I wish I had Handbook: House Davion! I need to compare these bastards' insignia to the current Feddie OOB!*

- - - -

Flight line

Ohakea

New Zealand

Earth

17 May, 20:03 local (04:03 EST)

Squadron Leader James Garvey, 75 Squadron RNZAF, glanced along the line of parked, olive-drab fighters. *I suppose I should be grateful that I've got as many as I do, but I'd feel better if I had more than six birds ready to fly when I'm going to be fighting these damned... "Mech" things.* He grimaced. *I can't believe I'm actually thinking that! It's like being a character in some bad Japanese cartoon!*

In only slightly different circumstances, the RNZAF would have been out of the fast-jet business for several years by this time, but after the abortive war between the US and Japan, not to mention the subsequent Indian near-invasion of Sri Lanka, a combination of a more defence-conscious government establishment and substantial Australian pressure on their trans-Tasman cousins to 'pull their weight (for once!)' has seen 75 Squadron's obsolescent A-4K Skyhawks replaced with a squadron of Saab JAS-39s. Marketed as the "Gryphon", the Swedish-designed aircraft was in fact more advanced than the Australians' F-18s, affordable, easy to maintain and, despite its compact size, capable of carrying only slightly less firepower than the 'Plastic Bug'.

Which was why eight of 75 Squadron's eighteen airframes were currently in Australia for joint training with the RAN.

Of the ten left at Ohakea, only six could be armed and crewed on such short notice. *Mainly because New Zealand's so far out of the way that no bastard's supposed to be able to reach us without weeks of strategic warning. Nobody ever counted on giant robots dropping in from friggin' space!*

On the other hand, the robots were about to get a lesson in air-power. It had taken almost an hour to get the Gryphons loaded - the WingCo had almost had a heart attack at the thought of bombing a New Zealand city, especially without direct orders from the government! - but now, the RNZAF was about to fly its first fighter-mission in anger for almost half a century. Four of the Gryphons were packing AGM-65F 'Maverick' missiles on their outer wing-pylons; the other two were carrying ECM pods and laser-designators; all six carried centreline drop-tanks and, on each inner pylon, a massive GBU-15 two-thousand-pound laser-guided bomb, to deal with the attackers' damned spaceship and, if the Mavericks weren't enough, to clean up the tin-men themselves.

Can't say I like the thought of that much collateral damage, either, but I will not see the first armed invasion of New Zealand's shores go unpunished! "Control, this is Theseus Lead: ready to taxi, over." And if the Yanks think I'm going to let their precious bloody 'Aluminium Clouds' have the pleasure of bombing Auckland, instead of me... well, that's why

the wingtip rails have live Sidewinders on them.

James Garvey was, of course, a proud native of Christchurch.

- - - -

**Operations, HMNZS *Te Kaha*
Hauraki Gulf, north-east of Auckland
Earth
That same time**

"Engineer, any chance of more speed?"

{"No more chance than when you asked ten minutes ago, Captain!"}
was the hot answer over the inter-phone.

Commander Barry Youngman winced: he'd deserved that. "Very well, Charge: best efforts."

As he hung up, he glanced about the compartment. Every officer and rating in sight was fully 'smurfed up' in their anti-flash gear and attending to their duties with a professional intensity honed in deployments off Afghanistan, the former UIR, and the pirate havens of Somalia. For an instant, he couldn't control a small, brief smile of pride - then he brought himself back to the moment. "Nav?"

The navigator glanced up from her display briefly. "Steady on course two-one-five and twenty-seven knots, sir: we should reach the outer harbour in fifty minutes."

"Pee-wo, time to firing range?"

The Principal Warfare Officer had just finished updating his plot in anticipation of that question. "Estimate thirty-five minutes before the main gun can engage targets in Ferguson Port, sir. The Sea Sprite's already orbiting the area, ready to observe fall-of-shot."

"Very well."

- - - -

Small town, Manawatu region
New Zealand
Earth
That same time

Re: "ARE YOU ***** SEEING THIS!?!?"

TRACE_COBURN: Walked in the door from work to see this leading CNN.

What. The. *****!?!?!?

NEBFER: But seroisly, Trace: your
okay?

[Click to expand...](#)

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TRACE_COBURN: AFAIK, all my family are well clear of Auckland. But I am seriously ***** **PISSED OFF** right now! This is **MY COUNTRY**, GODDAMMIT!



These ***** pirate bastards are about to get a front-row seat to some classic 'dirtbag militia' in action, and I hope they hate every last painful ***** second of it before they get put out of our misery.



(I hope TPTBs will pardon my abuse of the censortron.... when they get back from wherever they seem to have disappeared to. Has anyone seen a yellow star here since this started? ??? Or have the Federal Government tapped all of Fanpro and their freelancers as 'consultants'?)

[Click to expand...](#)

[Click to shrink...](#)

'Trace Coburn' hit 'post message', ignoring the 'there have been 7 new

posts in this thread' warning to simply send the message through, absently hearing a car pull into the driveway as he did so. Ignoring it for the moment - since he lived in a cul-de-sac, lots of people used that gateway to turn around - he headed down the hall into the living room to check out the latest on Sky and/or CNN. "Anything new?"

"Just what you see, love," his mother shrugged, still looking a little dazed. Their aged, infirm Border Collie was sitting up against her leg with his head resting comfortably on her thigh, despite the pain it had to be inflicting on his arthritic joints, and she was absently scratching his ears.

Even as 'Trace' watched, another 'Mech jogged into frame by the *Hunchback*. *COM-2D Commando, by the looks of it. With how battered and shabby those 'Mechs look, this has gotta be pirates... or a false-flag hit. And God, how fucking scary did the galaxy just become that I hope it's "just" pirates?*

There was a rap on the door.

"Are we expecting anyone?" he wondered aloud as he left the lounge. Opening the door, he saw... a pair of DPM-clad soldiers standing at the bottom of the steps: one his own age with three pips on his shoulder-straps, an older one with three stripes on his sleeve, both wearing MP brassards and - *Oh, shit!* - holstered sidearms. "I didn't think I had the computer's speakers turned up that loud!"

"We're not here about a noise complaint, mate." The Captain smiled thinly, opening a notebook to refer to something. "Do you post on the 'Classic BattleTech' forums under the screen-name 'Trace Coburn'? Do you, in fact, write a weekly column there under the title 'Fighter of the Week'?"

Ah, shit. I think my smart-arse mouth just wrote a cheque my fat-arse can't cash. "I'm... not going to be posting an article tomorrow night, am I?"

The sergeant snorted a laugh. "Probably not. The government would like to... avail itself of your expertise, sir. Would you mind coming with us?"

Would saying 'no' do me any good? "Where, and for how long?"

"We've been asked to convey you over to Palmerston North, sir: it's the nearest place with the video-conference facilities we need for you to speak with the Prime Minister."

"What does Don Brash want with - Oh." 'Trace' felt very foolish for a moment as it hit him. "You're kidding, right?"

Both red-caps shook their heads seriously.

Bloody Nora - welcome to the big leagues, rookie! "Should I pack a bag, or do I just need to grab my CBT books?"

"Just the books, mate," the officer smiled. "You can have the rest sent over later: our orders say 'utmost dispatch'."



Author's notes are in the discussion thread, at the bottom of [the 'test' post](#). FWIW, the thing about Garvey being from Christchurch and wanting to bomb Auckland? Imagine a Bostonian F-22 pilot who got the chance to shoot missiles into Manhattan or the Bronx.

**Pirate Convoy
Cornwall Park
Auckland, New Zealand**

Ping!

Leutnant Irdon Koltan ducked and cursed inventively as a bullet ricocheted off the transport truck's armored skin less than a meter from his head. Almost the entire trip back to the *Drakon* had his people be harassed by sniper fire. And the trip itself was taking far longer than it should have, what with the roads being choked with abandoned civilian vehicles that needed to be cleared out of the way, the need to fetch those of his people who had decided to do some private looting, the need to take an occasional detour, and fighting off the occasional band of irate but stupid militia. But now they were almost home.

Ping! "ARGH!!!"

"Zumross!" Koltan shouted into the radio as one of his men collapsed. "Have you found that sniper yet?"

A staccato pounding filled the air as the *Hermes II* mech fired its autocannon at a building. The building promptly collapsed, but thankfully the debris didn't fall into the convoy's path again.

Ping!

"Damn! Missed," came the mechwarrior's reply. "Sorry, sir. My sensors aren't showing squat, and I think there's more than one sniper anyway."

"Well that's just perfect," Koltan muttered as he shut off the radio. He raised his voice. "Okay, people, I can see the *Drakon* now! Let's double time it..."

Ping! "ARGH!"

"...right now!" Koltan finished. "Go! Go! Go!"

Chaos Blade said:

Ferguson's Port

Auckland, New Zealand

Earth

17 May 2005/3020

Hale was getting frustrated.

Yes, no plan survived contact with the enemy, but this was an ass backwards world, there was no enemy here, just prey.

Snarling he let loose a blast from his head laser against where he though the ants had been hiding.

against where he though the ants had been hiding. Again another container got a neat hole but there was no clue if he had gotten the runner this time.

"Fuck!" he slammed his fist in frustration. Mechs like his were not the best weapon to deal with infantry, not in a city. The ever expanding fuel puddle was not making things easier, either.

Turning quickly he peeked a glance at the remains of the crane and at Denaro's Commando wrestling with the remains of the crane.

"Denaro, how long?"

"Not sure boss."

"Not the answer I was looking for"

"Sorry sir, but I don't think we want to find out if a spark will set this shit off. Wish we had some foam at hand."

"W-what shit? What is going on out there?"

Jankowicz's was sounded half panicked, then again

he was buried alive.

"Noted Denaro, do your best. Jankowicz, shut up. You are in enough shit already." No, that wasn't very diplomatic, but that kid had been a handful since day one. Hell, he was tempted to leave his sorry ass behind, if it weren't for the mech.

Hale was about to turn back to his watchdog task when the radio crackled again, though this time it was in his private frequency.

"We got a problem boss," Koltan started.

Hale could feel his eyebrow starting to twitch. In one swift motion he turned his machine and let loose a laser barrage against one of the warehouses.

"Define 'Problem'."

"Got into a firefight with some locals, militia."

"You have Zumross with you; that shouldn't be a problem."

"Oh, they are history, but they managed to knock out the flatbed."

That was a problem. The Flatbed was a mech recovery vehicle, and while it was nowhere near as irreplaceable as a mech, he wasn't willing to leave it, and the loot it was hauling, behind.

"Shit!" Hale paused for a second. He needed to regain control of things, fast. "Ok, do this: leave Zumross and a few men behind, take the rest of the loot back to the Drakon. Virgil is back on the Ship, right?"

"Yep, he was in the first group."

"Good. He'll have to tow the Flatbed back. Arrange an escort for him, but I want you to stay behind. Make sure to put some Steel on Mamoto's spine."

"Will do Burg, been looking forward to that for quite some time." There was no love lost between Irdon Koltan and Victor Mamoto, nobody was exactly sure how the animosity got started. They just couldn't stand one another. Of course, of the two, Hale knew who he'd trust his back to.

[Click to expand...](#)

[Click to shrink...](#)

Dropship *Drakon* **Cornwall Park** **Auckland, New Zealand**

A grounded Dropship on a raid really didn't have much to do. Oh sure, there was the whole "watch out for a counterattack" thing, but that was why Captain Mamoto had a crew. No, Mamoto had more important duties. He was the pirate band's intelligence officer after all, so he was gathering intelligence, mostly by watching the local news stations even if the indigs were so primitive that they only broadcasted in 2D.

The local news stations were of course full of the story about the Hale's raid. One station had people speculating on who the raiders were and mentioned something about a game based on mechs. Mamoto concluded that they must have some memory of Battlmechs, but that clip of a crudely animated mech didn't look like any Mech that Mamoto had ever heard of. Their memory of mech designs was obviously deficient. Seriously, who had ever fielded something that looked like a bastard child of a *Marauder* and *Catapult*?

"Skipper!" Jane called, interrupting his enjoyment of the locals' reactions. "We got incoming aircraft."

"What?" Mamoto said, a little alarmed. His *Drakon* wasn't exactly in

the best shape for fending off fighters. "How many? Where from? Are they headed toward us?"

"I read six rising from several kilometers away in the northwest," Jane reported. "I think there's an airfield over that way." She paused. "I think they're pure air breathers."

"Six planes," Mamoto said nervously. "Hugo, fire up the engine and begin preparations for lift off."

"What about our guys on the ground?" Hugo asked.

"They either make it back in time or they don't," Mamoto told him. "Now do what I..."

"New contacts!" Jane shouted. "More fighters coming in low over the ocean to the northeast. They just popped up over our horizon. I estimate about half an hour to forty five minutes before they arrive. Count is... holy shit that's a lot of fighters..."

Ferguson's Port Auckland, New Zealand

"...incoming aircraft!"

"Roger that, *Drakon*. We'll be there in plenty of time," Hale replied, then cut the connection. As if they didn't have enough problems. "Any chance of AA support?"

"What?" Mamoto said, his voice tinged with a curious mix of outrage and fear. "And risk my hi... ship?"

"Oh, of course, can't risk that," Hale said sarcastically. Although truth be told, the Dropper really was too valuable to risk, but Hale valued his own skin more. Still, there was no use worrying about it right now. "Denaro, how's it coming?"

"Almost done here, boss," Denaro replied. While Hale had been busy keeping the local explosives wielding infantry at bay, Denaro had been busy using his *Commando* to slowly and meticulously pry the

tons of wreckage off the Stinger one small bit at a time. So far, no sparks had ignited the puddle of fuel under the pile.

"Thankyou, thankyou, thankyou..." Jankowicz started babbling.

"Shut up, Jankowicz," Hale growled as he started scanning the skies. There, he could see six specks with white contrails. They were still pretty distant, especially for a mech not exactly designed specifically for AA duties. Just on the off chance that he might hit, Hale fired off both medium lasers. Missed. Hale supposed that he was going to have to wait until they started strafing runs before he had a decent chance to hit them.

A warning light that Hale had never seen before popped up on his display.

Chaos Blade said:

off Cornwall Park (need to look at the map, between landing site, port to see where this would be more or less)

Auckland, New Zealand

Dana Zumross was bored. The knuckleheads Koltan had left behind to secure the flatbed weren't of the particular bright, nor good conversationalists. Then again she wasn't all that hot for the interpersonal relations, but after twenty minutes of making sure the militia didn't do anything stupid (like the poor bastards she had B.B.Q.ed before), well, anything was better than standing still.

Granted, she couldn't wait to be back on board, looking forward rubbing in Jankowicz's little screw up. Not to mention the, ah, recordings taken during his "short lived burial".

Oh, putting those in PA in the mess tonight, that definitely went into the to-do list.

Her mind then begun to wander onto more and more complex forms of torturing her fellow lancemate when she noticed something.

"That's weird, that indicator never lit up before" then again her Hermes was a bit temperamental, most inherited machines were.

"This is Drakon to all raiders, we got incoming aircraft, repeat, incoming aircraft."

She shook her head, there would be time to tinker latter.

She swiftly switched her machine to anti-air mode, but even as she turned towards the new threat Four Mavericks slammed onto her machine

[Click to expand...](#)

[Click to shrink...](#)

Since consequences didn't bother to post this here, I though I'd do it for him. He wrote all this.

Ferguson's Port
Auckland, New Zealand
Earth
17 May 2005/3020

On taking fire, the incoming planes went evasive and broke for the deck, now definitely moving towards the convoy. Hale blinked as the warning light vanished, taking a few more shots with his lasers, but not apparently hitting anything at the range and angle he was firing at before they ducked out of his line of sight. With a mental shrug, he went back to covering Denaro's back.

The first thing Sergeant Dansel consciously noticed when he regained awareness was pain. While wrapping the mattress and bedding supplies stowed in the room around himself had made the collapse survivable(along with a good guess as to where he wouldn't be squished, and more than one lifetime's worth of luck), it hadn't made it in any way pleasant. The second thing he noticed was a fair bit of weight upon him, putting uncomfortable pressure on various of his bits even through the padding still covering him, gradually decreasing to the accompaniment of clattering as he worked his way out from under what felt like every loose article of *everything* that had been in the room. The third was the complete and utter lack of light, which implied that the doorways into the compartment had collapsed, or at least been blocked. The fourth was the sound of metallic tearing and banging from directly above him. The fifth was the insistent ringing of his cell phone.

Bemusedly, he pulled it out to check, finding that it was actually the alarm going off. *Oh, right, final formation's in five. Wonder if I'll get an*

Article Fifteen for missing it? This set off a fit of hysterical giggling, as he used the light from the phone to get a grasp of his altered surroundings, determining that he was sitting on the storage and tool lockers that had occupied one wall of the room next to the engine, and that the other wall was now remarkably close to his head. While he continued to hunt for a flashlight, he pulled the walkie talkie from his cargo pocket, and said into it "Sky-Eye here, requesting status update, over."

Silence stretched on interminably, making him fear that either the transmitter was busted, or that everyone was dead. Finally, a voice came on "Whoever this is, this is a fucking shitty means of taking the piss."

"Sky-eye to teams, sorry to disappoint, but apparently Hell was full and I've been returned to feast upon the brains of the living. Ugghhh. Brains. No, not Johnson, I said brains. Over." By putting his back into it, Dansel was able to pry open the first locker, after realizing he shouldn't put his weight on the thing.

The long suffering voice of Private Johnson wearily said "Sorry to disappoint everyone, but that's Dansel all right. Still making the same crap jokes after four years too. Sarge, you've got about a million tons of metal overhead since the boom kind of snapped backwards, and one of those robot things digging down towards its buddy while the second keeps watch. Uhh, over."

"You know the deal, I'll come up with new material when you come up with my money. Sorry to be imprecise though, I meant the status of everyone else, specifically the two Bruces that I know I saw get hit before I barely failed to earn a Darwin. I was pretty sure mine sucked, but thanks for the details. Over.*Let's see, hardhat work gloves flashlight, all good, unwashed coveralls potato chips of dubious provenance no thanks, and oh awesome, Porn!* Now cheerfully contemplating getting caught masturbating by the pirates when they got to him, Dansel moved on to the next locker.

"Bollocks Six to Sky-eye. I've got four down so far, none dead yet. And I'll have you know my mother was named Bruce. Over."

"Copy. Any contact with higher? Over." *doodeedoo empty locker empty locker, hey tools! now I can figure out a way to get free if they get bored and go home! Hmmm, how does one use a cutting torch properly anyway?*

"Johnson here. Turns out the MPs are still holding Blankov because of his little incident last night, and left him his cell phone. Sergeant Flake's been talking to their commander, but they don't seem to be taking it seriously enough. I think his exact words were, 'If some fat-ass reservist forklift driver can take one down, we'll have them all in lock-up within the hour'." The sound of a muffled slap carried over the still open circuit. "Oww, over, sheesh."

"Bollocks six, please try to convince my country's official military S&M squad of the seriousness of the threat. Emphasize if you could the fact that they're going to need .50 caliber machine guns and anti-tank rockets in serious quantities to make any kind of impression in a direct fight, and they'd be best able to continue breathing by engaging at long range and immediately changing positions to give demolition teams a chance to rush from cover in immediate proximity to the mech and hit the joints. Over." *Hey, there's the first aid kit. Mmmmm, pills glorious pills.*

"Bollocks Six, roger. Any additional practical advice or instructions for us? Over."

"When in doubt, go with your motto, and at least double up whatever you were using in the demo packs earlier, try to get any arm mounted weapons too. Battery's fading, I'll try to find the most survivable hide I can. If I don't make it, I want one of you to make up some suitably stirring last words for me, because I'm fresh out of anything that isn't obviously stolen. Sky-eye, out." *Now, where would I be most likely to survive a pirate mech carelessly smashing his way through rubble, when he's probably going to deliberately squish me if I'm spotted?*

Inevitably, only one real possibility presented itself. *Great, I'm the jock shoving the nerd in the locker, and the nerd being shoved in the locker. Now all I need are some gender identity issues crossed with narcissism, and I can be the unattainable dream crush of the nerd who's completely into the jock. Damn, but those were some good pills, guess they weren't*

really Tylenol after all.

An interminable length of time passed, during which Dansel determined that he really didn't have room to try to play a game on his cell phone, as the crashing and tearing noises grew closer and louder. Eventually, a tearing noise came from all around him, followed by an immense sense of vertigo as he banged around the interior painfully despite the sleeping bag he'd used as a liner. With a bone jarring crash, all movement stopped, followed perversely a few seconds later by the locker door popping open of its own accord.

Ah, fresh air at last, cursed burning Daystar, I shall eventually snuff your foul blight from the heavens. Gee, I didn't think I was that close to any metal columns, it certainly didn't feel like I was in the air that long. Huh, there's another one, wonder what they're here for..... oh for fuck's sake. With mounting horror, Sergeant Dansel stared up, and up and further up at the mech towering over him. Minutely raising his head to glance all around, he noted that the closest significant cover was, in fact, the wreckage that the second mech was rapidly tearing into, flinging debris carelessly in all directions.

Hmmm, die like a bitch, die running like a bitch, cower in fear hoping not to die like a bitch, or blatant suicide. Put that way, there was really only one choice, at least to his drug-addled mind. Taking a swig from his canteen and another couple pills, he checked to be sure that everything was secured to or in his web gear, for once blessing his unit's inane policy of requiring full battle rattle for every damned thing. Then he waited for the next significant chunk to be tossed in his direction.

As it crashed to the ground nearby, Dansel sprung out of the locker and dashed straight toward the thirty-five foot war machine as it continued to minutely turn from side to side. Leaping forward, he grabbed the highest projection that he could, and began the laborious process of trying to climb the mech. Only two things made this remotely possible. First, that he'd had to climb two hundred plus feet of crane multiple times per day for the last week, to the point that he could easily delude himself into thinking that thirty feet of robot was no big deal. Second, he had drugs, rage, and adrenaline all lined up on his side, along with a pair of work gloves that provided a really

fantastic grip.

Eventually, he reached what looked like a rear access hatch, and set about using the cutting torch he'd brought along. *What the hell, it has to lead somewhere, and if their designers weren't complete puddings, or utter bastards, they'd account for the possibility that a mech might end up on its face with no arms.*

At this point Dansel unknowingly won his third metaphorical Luckiest Bastard on the Planet award for the day. A Star League vintage mech would have the hatch literally seamlessly integrated into the armor, so that only someone with deep familiarity with the design would have been able to find, much less attempt to open it. A House unit, even in the current era, would have the hatch made from the same material as the armor, so that it would have scoffed at the efforts of a 20th century man portable torch. A militia unit or personal machine of a feudal lord would at least attempt to run a full check at regular intervals, to determine if any degradation in function had accrued from action or simple wear, and if some kind of repair or jury-rigged fix was needed.

Unfortunately, Captain Hale's machine, unbeknown to him, had suffered serious damage before he was assigned it, necessitating a jury rig of the rear hatch, followed by the tech in question being killed before he could properly update his records. His tech of the time, also unbeknown to him, had had a tendency to simply sign off on the fiddly details that didn't directly impact combat effectiveness, since simply maintaining some semblance of combat effectiveness was so difficult. After he had absconded with the mech, the pirate mechanic he had to rely upon had a tendency to simply sign off on the combat critical functions unless constantly ridden, and as a result deliberately shunned all of the small details that generally escaped a Mechwarrior's eye out of pure spite.

Dansel cut through the access lock, felling the pilot with one punch to the jaw. Yanking the neurohelmet off his head he kicked the pathetic pirate out of the mech, sneering as he bent the mech to his will. Stomping up to the dropship, he manfully kicked the door down before punching straight up to the bridge and forcing the crew to pilot him to the jumpship. Taking control, he formed his own pirate

gang, which swiftly grew into a nation, as he brought the Inner Sphere and then the Clans to heel. Oh yeah, and he totally made Katherine Steiner-Davion and Isis Marik his personal sex slaves, and made them wear skin-tight leather outfits, and...

Sergeant Dansel shook himself slightly to dispel the pleasant daydream, as he devoted his full attention to cutting through the lock. Who knew that jacking a mech would take so long, or be so damned boring? The mech he was on raised its arms and started firing its lasers at something in the distance. *Not my people I guess, unless they've decided to get on their own cranes, but still, sucks to be whoever that is. Hey visible color change, that's progress.*

Still, the materials were tough, and burn-through took quite a lot of time. And, unfortunately for Dansel, the internal sensors of Hale's Hunchback were in fair shape. So while he'd maintained watch over the surrounding area, taking the occasional potshot at suspicious movement and making damned sure the planes didn't come back into view, Hale gradually noticed the heat gauge in a very localized spot start to shoot upwards. After running a quick diagnostic, in a voice of preternatural calm, he said "Denaro, please check the back of my mech and make sure there isn't one of these little bastards sitting on me. If there is, get over here and remove it by hand." He tried to get at the gnat with his own mech's arms, but the design of the Hunchback was sadly incapable of reaching around far enough, and the heat gauge hadn't quite risen enough for him to start slamming his mech into things, much less try shooting himself in the back with his own weapons.

"See if there's a what on your who? Umm, yeah boss, there's a guy on your ass with a cutting tool working on your rear hatch. Let me get myself extricated and I'll be right over and he's looking at me, and he's grinning. Why is he grinning boss?" The answer to that question came a moment later, as with two sharp cracks the satchel charges just placed in the Commando's knees went off. As Hale spun his mech around to see his subordinate crash to the ground, two more of the seemingly never-ending stream of bastards on this planet lunged

forward and shoved yet more satchel charges into the arms of his mech. Triggering his lasers, he saw both of the late comers go down, but the cold comfort that provided was spoiled by the sudden feel of a draft in his cockpit.

The AGM-65F Maverick was designed as a bunker-busting weapon and carries a three-hundred-pound high-explosive warhead. Granted, the chemical composition of those warheads was somewhat less advanced than those found in the larger BattleTech universe, and they were never meant to defeat BattleTech's super-science ablative armour, but even so, they were more than enough to hit a medium 'Mech like the *Hermes II* like thunderbolts from the hand of Zeus.

Two of the missiles caught the *Hermes* in its 'spine' and right 'shoulder-blade', shattering the armour on those sections and wrecking most of the underlying structural members, to boot. But it was the other two missiles that struck the crucial blows: hammering into the 'Mech's left flank, they pulverised its armour completely, obliterated the underlying endo-frame... and touched off the autocannon's remaining ammunition cassettes.

A colossal series of explosions tore the 'Mech apart like a toy stuffed with firecrackers, and Dana Zumross shrieked in agony as feedback overloaded the circuits of her neurohelmet, spearing through her temples like white-hot chisels. The agony smashed her into unconsciousness even before the *Hermes*' computer triggered her command couch's ejection sequence.

The rocket-powered seat obligingly carried its 'MechWarrior soaring high into the air to descend on a parafoil. It neither knew nor cared that its passenger was already comatose.

- - - -

Hale's already foul mood was not helped by seeing Zumross' green icon vanish from his display and replaced by a simple yellow triangle: the emblem for an ejected pilot. "Oh. Fuck. THIS!" Forgetting his unwanted passenger for the moment, he shifted his aim, tracking on one of the fighter-pairs that had just made its run, and mashed his TICs again, this time thumbing the control to the *Hunchback*'s primary weapon as well.

Both laser bolts flashed past the Gryphons' noses like lateral lightning, spectacular but harmless; Hale had given them too much

'lead'. But Theseus Four's luck ran out an instant later, when he flew into part of the burst from the *Hunchback's* colossal Tomodzuru Type 20 autocannon. Caught by firepower that could stagger an *Atlas*, the Gryphon's frail airframe - and pilot - were simply crushed out of existence, leaving only a splash of burning fuel and metal confetti scattered across the sky to mark their passing.

- - - -

HMNZS Te Kaha **That same time**

"The Air Force is engaging now, sir," the XO reported. "They're asking that we not fire on the robots, so we don't spoil their aim."

"Right, then." Youngman smiled thinly. "That leaves us with the big target, then, doesn't it? Peewo, how's the feed from the Sea Sprite?"

"We're all set here, sir. That spaceship of theirs almost looks like a travelling roadshow for bloody FIFA."

And really: nobody brings a soccer ball to the park unless they want it to get a thorough kicking. "Five-inch, sustained fire, at the spaceship."

"Five-inch, aim of target!"

"ENGAGE!"

- - - -

Drakon **That same time**

Reynold Mamoto's already profane monologue on this FUBAR raid was a crescendo now, his cursing and his agitation reinforcing each other by the moment. "Hale and his fucking 'soft target'! Why did I ever -?"

God kicked *Drakon*. And he was wearing steel-capped boots.

"What the fuck was THAT?" Mamoto screamed, the last word almost lost in another explosion.

"Artillery from something" *WHAM!* "to the north-east!" Dietrich reported, her hands massaging the controls for more data.

"That's" *WHAM!* "out to sea, dammit!" Mamoto blinked. *How the hell could they have artillery -?*

"It" *WHAM!* "must be a surface warship or something," *WHAM!* "Captain! It's probably got three" *WHAM!* "guns, because I'm reading a" *WHAM!* "shot every three seconds!"

"Okay, fuck" *WHAM!* "this! Chin, close the" *WHAM!* "doors and get us skybound, we" *WHAM!* "are LEAVING!"

"What about Hale?" Dietrich wondered, mostly for form's sake.
WHAM!

"FUCK Hale!" Mamoto snarled, flinching as another shell exploded against *Drakon's* armoured shell. *He wanted to find the motherlode: now, he can friggin' well take his time looking!*

- - - -

In all honesty, barring a minutes-long barrage or incredible luck, *Te Kaha's* five-inch gun was unlikely to destroy *Drakon* outright: its HE shells were lighter than those of even the smallest of Star League artillery pieces, the 'dinky' 150mm Thumper, and each round could make little impression against the *Union's* well-armoured hide. But that didn't mean that those shells couldn't do damage in other ways. 'Misses' that landed on the grass outside the DropShip sent shards of shrapnel brutally slashing into the 'Mech- and cargo-bays through the open doors, ricocheting from bulkhead to bulkhead until they spent their energy or were 'caught' by something - like the fleshy bodies of exposed personnel, or crates of supplies, or loot.

Or control runs.

- - - -

"Captain, I'm not getting" *WHAM!* "any response from the bay doors!"

WHAM! "WHAT?" Mamoto screeched.

"I can't close the bay doors!" *WHAM!* "If we try to break atmo, they'll be" *WHAM!* "open to space!"

- - - -

Of course, the more times you shoot at something, the better the chances you'll fire that infamous 'Golden Bullet' - a freak hit in the right place, at the right time, to cause catastrophe for the foe. The ur-example of a 'Golden Bullet' is the appalling fate of HMS *Hood*.

In *Te Kaha's* case, one of her five-inch shells landed almost squarely on *Drakon's* Turret One, which covered the ship's 'bow' arc in flight. 'Almost', because it found the slightest seam in the ship's poorly-maintained and already-battered armour, punching through into the turret's guts, where it detonated amongst a cluster of laser-projectors, autocannons, and missile launchers - and their magazines.

- - - -

Reynold Mamoto blinked, trying to focus blurred eyes. *Why am I face-down on the deck? And why can't I hear anything? I feel like I got stepped on by Hale's damned Hunchback, or something...*

After a moment, *Drakon's* deck trembled under him again, and he blinked again, rolling onto his side. Now he was looking at the flight station, where Hugo Chin was still sitting in his chair, but there was something strange about Hugo. Something terribly wrong.

It took him a long while to figure out what it was.

Oh, that was it: Hugo's arms were gone.

Poor Hugo: he's so proud of how well he plays his guitar. He'll have a hard time doing that without his arms.

Then reality came swimming back into focus.

[/QUOTE = Death By Chains;4156470]

Pirate Dropship *Drakon*
Auckland, New Zealand
Earth
17 May 2005

Fear gripped Mamoto the instant he realized that Chin was dead. Adrenaline pumping through his veins, he leapt for the pilot's station. Luckily, the controls were mostly intact if blood splattered. Not even thinking about the fact that he wasn't strapped in, his hand slammed down on the engine ignition button.

Holy shit! Koltan thought as he picked himself up off the deck of *Drakon's* main cargo bay. He and his people had just boarded with the majority of the loot when the bombardment had begun. Then something made the 3500 ton vessel ring like a bell. We're being shelled by artillery!

"Secure the loot!" he ordered his shaken people and deck hands.
"Move it fast people! We still have to go back for..."

A familiar rumbling from beneath his feet started, interrupting the infantry commander. It was the *Drakon's* fusion engines starting up. Koltan's eyes went immediately to the door he and his people had just come through. It was still wide open to the open air.

"Oh, hell no!" he shouted. "CLOSE THE BAY DOOR!"

"We can't!" a tech shouted back. He could barely be heard above the rising din. "We can't retract the ramp! And the outer door won't close while the ramp's extended!"

"Then close the inner door!" Koltan ordered. The bay doors of course

were actually airlocks sized for use by mechs.

The noise was near deafening now. Outside, Koltan could actually see the ground falling away. A heavy wind was blasting through the bay forcing the pirates to grab anything they could secure. If the Dropship broke atmosphere with that door still open...

"That inner door doesn't work in ages!" the tech replied, voice now completely drowned out. Koltan was glad he could read lips.

Then he thought about what the tech had just said.

"Surface ship sighted!" Dietrich shouted, eyes locked on her readouts. Hugo had been her friend, and now he was gone. But she couldn't deal with that right now. She had more immediate concerns right now, like not dying herself.

"Kill it!" the skipper screamed, his voice raised several octaves by obvious terror. "Kill it now!"

"Gladly," Dietrich muttered as her left hand played across the weapons controls. Her right wasn't responding to her commands and was sending off a lot of pain signals. A little analyst in the back of her mind said her right arm was probably broken. But for this, her left was more than sufficient.

The side of the *Drakon* erupted in fire. A particle projection cannon, two medium autocannon, and twin long ranged missile launchers fired a single volley at the *HMNZS Te Kaha*. Traveling at near light speed, the PPC bolt arrive first and missed, passing across the ship barely above head height just aft of bridge superstructure. Autocannon shells arrived next, streams of shells strafing across the bow and stern of the ship and smashing bulkheads and sending splinters of metal scything across any crew unfortunate enough to be near the impact points.

The LRMs arrived last. But their flight was interrupted by a wall of bullets thrown up by the *Te Kaha's* single Phalanx CIWS. While

autocannon shells could brush through the hail with ease, the more fragile missiles could not. Many of them were swatted aside, but many more were not. There were simply too many of them. Eighteen missiles were knocked out of the sky. Seven more missed the *Te Kaha* and plunged harmlessly into the water. The remaining fifteen scattered across the entire remaining surface of the frigate, gouging out craters from steel, smashing exposed equipment, and scouring the entire exposed deck of any remaining crewmembers. One lucky missile went right through the bridge window.

The surviving planes of the RNZAF buzzed impotently below the rising Dropship. Their missile load out had been configured for ground attack after all. In the distance, the approaching flight from the Nimitz watched the brilliant light that was the *Drakon* race for space, too far away for them to do anything. A few tried anyway, sending air to air missiles at that fantastic heat source, but the alien vessel simply rose above them.

The howling air was definitely racing out the open bay door. Koltan could feel his ears pop as the pressure dropped.

"We need to use the manual override!" he shouted at the tech. "Where is it?"

The tech looked at him wide eyed. Then his eye drifted over to the open airlock door, just in time to see an unlucky soldier lose his grip and sail through it, screams lost in the noise.

"Bloody wonderful," Koltan muttered to himself. "Of course it's in the airlock."

Taking a risk, he took one hand off the pipe he had been using as an anchor and reached for his utility belt. It was a silly and expensive thing he had bought in his pre-pirate days on a lark, but it had some useful gadgets on it. Among them was a grappling hook with nearly three hundred meters of light, spider silk cable complete with powered winch.

Koltan attached the hook to his anchor... and then let go. He flew towards the open bay door, and was brought up just short as the governors kicked in. Then he let the cable play out slowly as he spelunked inside the open airlock scanning the interior for the manual release.

It was getting hard to breath.

There it was! A heavy lever surrounded by faded black and yellow stripes. Koltan made his way carefully over to it. Something big and heavy flew past Koltan as he did; it nearly hitting him. But it didn't, so he paid it no mind.

An eternity later, his hand fell on the lever and Koltan pulled with all his might. The lever moved with great reluctance born of poor maintenance and accumulated build up, but move it did. There was a flash of light and suddenly the boarding ramp was fluttering away into the atmosphere. Koltan couldn't watch it long because the great outer doors smoothly slid shut.

Koltan collapsed to the still rumbling deck as soon as the air stopped moving outwards, ears still ringing. He lay there exhausted for long moments.

"I'm going to kill Mamoto," he growled eventually.

Hale's Hunchback
Auckland, New Zealand
Earth
17 May 2005

A voice sounded from behind Hale: "Oi, motherfucker! Power down the mech and peacefully exit via the front, or burn to death! Do the words 'Molotov cocktail' mean anything to you you piece of shit?" The voice was accompanied by the smell of something reminiscent of ICE fuel, and the sound of liquid sloshing and a low intense burning sound.

Hale sat paralyzed for a second, as he did indeed remember the meaning of the words from his long past officer training. As his lips moved soundlessly while he tried to form a reply, the sight of the newly scarred *Drakon* lifting steadily into the sky crushed what last hope he'd held. "Awww, did da widdle piwate's fweinds weave him to die? Now, dipshit, the only reason you aren't roasting yet is because the smell of burning flesh takes forever to wash out of a cockpit."

"I'm, I'm, I'm powering down now, I'm kneeling so I can exit, just give me a second" *How could this have all gone so horribly wrong?* The Hunchback assumed the standard position for field disembarkation, some long-forgotten designer having put more than a little thought into making each mech capable of letting a pilot out on flat ground without laying flat down on its ass. Popping the cockpit, he began to descend by pure reflex.

"All right, if someone could please take custody of the murderous idiot and call the MPs, I'd appreciate it! Kindly refrain from administering superfluous kickings, the last thing I need today is the ACLU on my case! I'll be down in a sec after making sure he hasn't booby-trapped anything!" *Booby trapped hell, if anyone thinks I'm not taking my chance to be the first Earther in a mech cockpit, they've been taking better pills than I have.*

A minute later, Sergeant Dansel descended from the front of the mech to find two of the Aussies covering the kneeling prisoner from behind and either side. Walking up to Captain Lewis he quietly said "Your

men captain?"

"Fitch and Mckay didn't make it. Cassell, Bourke, Allwood, Hutton and Smeaton are all down and being looked after, and your internationally accredited bondage team is on its way, but they took a hell of a beating, so they'll be a minute. I have to say, I'm disappointed mate, I thought you were going to take the ship as an encore."

"Guess they just heard their mothers' calling Captain. I'm just going to do some shameless gloating to break down this schmuck's will." Walking around in front of Captain Hale. With great ceremony, he produced a quite filthy rag from one cargo pocket that smelled heavily of gasoline, triggered the cutting torch briefly, then took out his canteen, sloshed it around, and took a healthy swig. "I'm guessing since you had the heaviest mech, you were in charge. So, for the most important two questions of your life, Colonel, General, El Supremo Commandante, or whatever the hell you call yourself, How did you find us, and what year is it?"

White House Situation Room
Washington DC
United States of America
Earth
17th May 2005, 7.48am EST

"Mr. President we have our senior man on the ground ready to teleconference." At Ryan's nod, he activated the communications link, and a harried looking and visibly sweating Colonel appeared.

"Colonel, what do you have for us?"

"Mr. President, at roughly 0300 hours your time, Ferguson's Port experienced an extra-terrestrial pirate incursion. Cooperating with Australian forces present for the upcoming exercise, and New

Zealand's armed forces, we were able to neutralize the pirates' combat element, but unable to prevent their transport and support personnel from effecting their escape."

"Colonel, I have all that in the official report. It also says that a Sergeant Dansel was instrumental in the destruction and capture of the attacking forces, is there a reason he is not there with you as requested?"

The increasingly pale colonel replied "Mr President, Sergeant Dansel is heavily involved in tactical training exercises and familiarization regarding the new threat. We're getting him here as quickly as possible."

"'Tactical training exercises and familiarization'. Colonel, would this have anything to do with the report I have received from the New Zealand government regarding an armed Hummvee taken from your MP unit, apparently crewed by five Australians and one 'loud bloody yank', tearing around Auckland, patronizing at last report, a local game store, an express dry cleaning facility, and an electronics store? As well as briefly vandalizing the New Zealand SAS barracks with pirate paraphernalia?"

"Mr President, Sergeant Dansel, during the course of his exploits, ingested a drug that he initially took to be Tylenol. One of the MP medics unknowingly administered a medication which caused an adverse reaction, triggering a hyper manic state. At last report I have, he is currently simultaneously refereeing a 'Grand Melee' and starting up a mechwarrior rpg group, while utilizing what breaks occur to participate in the ongoing LAN party and take his turn at the karaoke machine with a variety of Australian themed songs that none of us have ever heard of. I was, frankly, stalling in an attempt to give him more time to wind down before you saw him."

"Colonel, your loyalty to your troops does you credit. Now get him on the line" Ryan said, manfully ignoring his Vice President as Robbie Jackson was utterly failing to restrain his laughter. Shortly, Sergeant Dansel stepped in front of the camera, in a perfectly pressed uniform, with a rigidity that approached rigor mortis, if not outright fossilization. "Good evening Staff Sergeant, at least the dry cleaning

facility now becomes clear. At Ease."

"Mr President." Sergeant Dansel relaxed minutely, but seemed unwilling to volunteer further comment.

"You don't have any comment about a promotion implicitly approved by your commander in chief son?

"Mr President, my only two concerns are that I am in fact currently flagged by weight control so as to be ineligible to receive promotion, and that even with a waiver, said ineligibility makes it more likely that due to a paperwork problem payroll will take another two years to notice and correct my pay rate up to my current grade, much less my increased rank."

If anything, the interview got more surreal from there.

Dropship Drakon
Earth-Moon Lagrange Point 1
17 May 2005/3020

The Drakon broke atmosphere, reoriented itself, and then began thrusting at a leisurely one gravity towards the Jumpship White Elephant.

"Elephant, this is Drakon," Mamoto said tiredly into the radio, "We're coming in. Have a docking collar ready for us." Mamoto had never been a stickler for procedure, but right now, it was extremely comforting.

"Jesus, Mamoto," replied the Elephant's captain. "What the hell happened to you guys down there?"

"Hale's 'milk run' turned out to be a damned trap, Benson" Mamoto replied. "He got swarmed by militia and aircraft. We barely got out alive."

"Shit, you got no loot at all?" Benson asked.

"Didn't you hear me? They're dead!" Mamoto said, his voice tinged with hysteria. "They're all dead!"

"THE HELL YOU SAY!" a new voice roared. It didn't come from the speakers but from behind Mamoto. Mamoto's head whipped around to see a bruised, bloody, and enraged Koltan charge into the bridge.

"Eep!" Mamoto squeaked as the other man grabbed him by the lapels of his jumpsuit with one hand and shook him.

"WERE YOU OUT OF YOUR BLOODY MIND?!" Koltan roared into the Dropship captain's face. "YOU TOOK OFF WITH THE BLOODY BAY DOOR OPEN TO SPACE, YOU MORON! YOU COULD HAVE KILLED US ALL!"

Mamoto babbled something about saving the ship.

"SAVE THE SHIP, MY ASS!" Koltan roared, shaking Mamoto some more. "YOU WERE SAVING YOUR HIDE! NOW TURN THIS SHIP AROUND! WE GOT PEOPLE TO PICKUP!"

"Um, excuse me," a soft, feminine voice said.

"WHAT?" Koltan demanded, his ire turning to the speaker.

"Not that I mind if you strangle the skipper," Jane Dietrich said told the infantry commander while cradling her right arm. "But there's not much point in going back. Not unless you can fight through that."

With a nod, she indicated a bank of screens showing what looked like the local news. Each screen showed something different. The most relevant ones had the pirates mechs. One had the Hermes II being nailed by streaks of fire in the back and exploding. Another had the fallen remains of the Stinger and Commando. A fourth showed Hale's Hunchback, but in shutdown position and local militia standing around and on top of it. Other screens showed fighters flying through the sky and obvious wet navy ships at sea, one of whom look mauled. All in all, it didn't look good.

"Well, damn," Koltan said mildly when he finished taking the images in. "I guess Burg's on his own."

"Can you let me go now?" Mamoto choked out.

"Sure," Koltan replied, releasing the Dropship captain.

"Than..." Mamoto began.

He was interrupted when Koltan's other hand came up in a fist and punched his lights out.

Dropship Drakon
Earth-Moon Lagrange Point 1
18 May 3020

"Move it, people!" Koltan barked, his voice echoing off the bulkheads of Drakon's main cargo bay. "We're almost at the jump point and I want everything secure before we go into free fall again!"

"C'mon, sir," one of the soldiers helping with tying vehicles and cargo containers around complained. "Wouldn't this be easier in free fall?"

"Why, Griffin, are you volunteering to be our next 'accident' victim?" Koltan asked loudly, making sure that everyone present could hear him. He threw a significant look at a red splotch with the consistency of strawberry jam that decorated one bulkhead. That poor bastard had been caught by a shifting cargo container during the clusterfuck of a liftoff.

"Sir! No, sir!" Griffin replied with alacrity as he went back to strapping helping move a crate into position.

"Sir?" a hesitant voice spoke.

"What is it, Burns?" Koltan asked, turning to the speaker. Maria Burns was the *Drakon's* chief engineer, and much to Koltan's surprise when first meeting her, looked to be fairly competent at her job. "The vehicles are secure?"

"Yes, sir," Burns replied, nodding. "Vehicles at least can move themselves. I was just wondering what was in those." She pointed at one of the cargo containers being strapped down to the deck by the Koltan's grunts.

"Don't know, and right now, I frankly don't care," Koltan replied. "Right now, I'm feeling lucky that we got away with anything at all. They could all be filled with copies of old Immortal Warrior serials for all I care."

"You're not even curious?" Burns asked, surprised.

"Burns, we're stuck in this system for the next six days or so until the *Elephant* is ready to jump," Koltan told her. "We really don't have enough people left to knock over a grade school, never mind make another raid on that hell planet down there. And beyond that, we've got several weeks of travel time before we get 'home' such as it is. We have plenty of time to see what we made off with."

"If you say so..."

Burns was interrupted when the PA squealed an ear shattering feedback. Well, Koltan would have considered it ear shattering before that cockup of a lift off.

"Leutnant Koltan, please report to the bridge."

"Fantastic," Koltan said, eyes rolling in exasperation. He had left explicit instructions to only be called in case of an emergency. "More problems."

By the time Koltan reached the Dropship's bridge, the gravity was gone. The *Drakon* had reached the pirate point and had come to rest relative to the Jumpship *White Elephant*. Koltan was surprised to find only Jane Dietrich present. The corpse of the dead Hugo Chin was gone and the majority of his blood was mopped up. Captain Mamoto was nowhere to be found.

"Where's Mamoto?" Koltan demanded as he floated in.

Dietrich shrugged, careful not to jar the makeshift cast encasing her right arm. "Last I heard, he was in the sickbay hopped up on tranquilizers," the woman answered indifferently. "No big loss. It's not like he did more than give idiotic orders anyway. Anyway, that's not why I called you up here."

"Okay them," Koltan said patiently, barely holding on to his frayed temper. "What's the problem?"

"The *Elephant* is refusing to let us dock," Dietrich answered.

"What? Why?"

In reply, Dietrich just held out a headset. Growling, Dietrich took them and put them on.

"*Elephant*, this is Leutnant Koltan," he said immediately. "What's this I hear about you refusing to let us dock?"

"How do I know that you're really who you say you are?" Captain Benson's voice came back immediately. "The *Drakon* could have been captured by the locals for all I know. You could be Koltan, but you could also have a gun pointed to your head saying what I want to hear."

"Oh, you have got to be shitting me," Koltan groaned.

"You could have a ship full of soldiers ready to storm aboard my ship and kill us all," Benson went on. "Don't come any closer! I'm armed, you know!"

"Yeah? Well so am I," Koltan replied. "And you know what? Despite the crappy condition of this Dropship, I still have more than enough armor to take whatever you dish out. You on the other hand, can't take what I can dish out. So you can either let us dock, or we can blow you out of space!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"You're right, Benson," Koltan said quietly. "I wouldn't dare."

"Hah! I knew it!"

"I said that *I* wouldn't dare," Koltan continued. "But if the locals have really boarded and captured the *Drakon*, then *I* wouldn't have any say on weapons control. *They* on the other hand would dare. So if you don't let us dock, *they* are more than willing to destroy your precious Jumpship. Understand me?"

"Uh...."

"So the question you have to ask yourself is, 'Do I feel lucky?'" Koltan told him. "Is the *Drakon* full of hostile locals enraged at the attack on their world? Because if the *Drakon* is, Benson, then you're dead if you *don't* let us dock. If you do let us dock, then there's a chance that you get to live as their prisoners. Now, if the *Drakon* isn't full of locals, then you have nothing to fear because we're all friends here." Koltan's voice dropped some more into a low growl. "We ARE all friends here, right Benson?"

"Right," Benson agreed reluctantly.

"Okay then, Benson," Koltan said, his voice warming slightly. "Now ask yourself, 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do you feel lucky, Benson? Do you?"

There was silence at the other end of the connection for several long moments.

"Docking Collar Two is nearest to you," Benson finally said. "Don't dent it to much now."

"Will do," Koltan replied. "*Drakon* out." As he handed the headset back to Dietrich, he noticed the woman staring at him with a funny expression on her face. "What?"

"Are you... busy later?" Dietrich asked, a bit breathlessly.

National Training Center
Fort Irwin California, United States
May 20 2009/3020

Fort Irwin already hosted the largest concentration of spec ops ever assembled in the history of mankind, and yet more troops were arriving hourly, interspersed with scientists, more conventional troops, and civilian writers. Major Domingo 'Ding' Chavez wasn't sure what exactly the US had given New Zealand in order to gain custody of the captured machines, but the presence of what looked to be a substantial portion of the entirety of New Zealand's armed forces, along with the very obvious US led exercises now taking place in and around New Zealand nearly a week ahead of schedule, hinted that the concession hadn't come free.

Physical Training, under the conditions, was a pure bitch to coordinate. Beyond the simple matter of keeping the Hunchback under cover while the pirate ship was overhead, it was also necessary to keep anything looking like large groups of troops from exercising in the open where they theoretically had no business being. Indoor training facilities were at a premium, and as a field grade officer, he barely made the cut for being able to pick his own timeslot. *However, there are exceptions* he mused to himself, as he lapped Staff Sergeant Dansel again.

Staff Sergeant Dansel at this point frankly looked one step away from death, in the wrong direction, sweat practically pouring off of him as he staggered towards the finish line. At one side Captain Lewis ran backwards pacing him, on the other side Lance Corporal Hutton did the same, while Private Allwood, missing most of his left leg below the knee, actually did circles around them in his wheelchair. However, rather than the usual malice and contempt this might imply, this was actually a security detail, after the third kidnapping attempt by the NZ SAS in the last day. The words 'cheeky yank bastard' were still visible in permanent marker on the back of his neck from the last time he'd made the mistake of being caught alone. Rumor had it(correctly) that he'd suggested the wording himself when the New Zealanders who'd cornered him seemed unable to agree on what to do, and that he'd provided the marker

himself(incorrect in this case).

As he passed the finish line for the final time, and slowed to a walk, Captain Lewis wordlessly passed Dansel a bottle of water and a pair of salt tablets. Swallowing them and draining the bottle in one go, Dansel held out his hand allowing Hutton to fill it with another bottle, that he emptied at a more sedate pace. "Sir" he said to Major Chavez, swiftly catching up now that he was able to set a walking pace.

"Staff Sergeant. Got any tips for when I get my crack at Quasimodo?" The Hunchback had immediately received its new name from the troops upon arrival at Fort Irwin, and had been found the following morning when the hangar was opened to begin training with its new moniker painted on along with a stylised Disney hunchback on its chest, a broken bottle of champagne on the ground next to it, standing twenty feet from where it had been carefully placed the day before, with its tracks all over the hangar. Unsurprisingly, the guards that had been posted in the hangar had developed acute cases of short-term amnesia, made even more suspect by overheard conversations to the effect of 'dude it was awesome!' The fact that Staff Sergeant Dansel had volunteered to command the first guard duty shift may have had something to do with why the matter was quietly dropped.

"You just have to feel the path the machine wants to take, and shape it to work for you. Sorry to get all mystical sir, but if I had anything concrete, it would be part of the briefings." Part of the purpose for everyone being at the Center, in addition to familiarization with Battlemech capabilities and interminable class work, was to run everyone they possibly could through their paces on the machine. With only one functional Battlemech, Earth, or at least the allied nations currently actively cooperating, had no choice but to attempt to find the best instinctive pilot they possibly could in the event Quasimodo's deployment became necessary. No one knew exactly who had first popularized the term 'synch ratio' as an easy shorthand for the aggregate test results. However, Dansel's results were easily the highest for the official time anyone had been able to spend in the cockpit.

"Too bad mano. Can you at least fill me in on which of the rumors about you are completely made up? Like the thing with the GP medium?" Some of the things being said simply couldn't possibly be true, and his physical performance in training was generally unremarkable at best. But it was an undeniable fact that First Sergeant Vega, possibly the strongest member of Rainbow Six, had nearly hurt himself when he tried to casually lift one of Dansel's duffel bags during the inevitable baggage clusterfuck at the airfield, said duffel having turned out to be entirely full of books.

"Well sir, for a start, it wasn't a GP medium tent that I singlehandedly threw on the back of a truck, it was just a small. Is it true that your lot had a part in what went down in China with the nukes?" Speculation about that had run rampant in the military community, and more than a few members of Dansel's unit had stayed on friendly terms with assorted SOCOM personnel after their deployment down to Fort Bragg, and heard some juicy tidbits about the 'Men of Black'.

"Officially, I have no knowledge of what may have occurred in China that night to stop all but one of the nukes from launching. I certainly couldn't say anything to confirm or deny that the demolition of fueled nuclear missiles by hand is almost as insane as one of your stunts. What about the thing with the truck tire?" That night was still the stuff of nightmares for Ding, with the simple pressure of a life or death operation to save millions compounded by never knowing which missile might explode catastrophically to kill you even if you succeeded.

"Well sir, then I unofficially owe you a beer and a beatdown, since the one missile you may or may not have been anywhere near when it launched headed close enough for my home for me to watch the fireworks. The tire thing, man I thought no one actually was paying attention to that. Don't know what I was thinking, but when it started bouncing towards me, instead of just stepping to the side, I just moved back and caught the thing just as it was running out of momentum. Looked a hell of a lot more impressive than it really was probably, but still in my top twenty dumbest things I've ever done."

The two continued to trade anecdotes and good-natured ribbing as

they walked once around the track. "Well sir, I'm not out of breath at all, so it looks like it's time for me to embarrass myself some more. Have a good one sir." With that Sergeant Dansel began running around the track again with his escorts, Captain Lewis pausing to give Major Chavez a gimlet stare. This wouldn't be the first time the damned Kiwis had tried impersonation to gather intel or effect a snatch after all.

**Albion rental apartment complex,
Palmerston North,
New Zealand,
May 20 2005/3020**

'Trace Coburn' had spent a lot of time in Palmerston North before, but never in accommodations so flash. Not that he'd really noticed, or particularly cared; so long as he had a decent bed, room to spread out his books and papers so he could read and work, and a high-speed connection for the new laptop the government had bought him to support his 'consultancy work', he was pretty much oblivious to everything outside of the screen and the data he was combing through.

Upon reflection after the fact, he was a little surprised that he hadn't been more nervous about his briefing of the Prime Minister and his Cabinet beforehand or during... but the fact that he and they had had half an eye on the live coverage of the raid throughout the video-conference had probably kept him from internalising the situation until it was over. (The fact that he rarely invested much emotion in politics or politicians had probably helped.) Once it was done, the red-caps had handed him a brand-new Dell laptop and a burned DVD and hustled him off to Ohakea, where he'd been crammed into the rear seat of a Gryphon trainer like too much stuffing into a chicken and flown up to Auckland for a first-hand look. He might have derived more pleasure from getting his first-ever ride in one of Earth's newest fighter-jets had he not been frantically trying to re-assess his entire world-view. On the other hand, even with his shaky grasp of social nuance, before he'd climbed the ladder into the JAS-39D he'd remembered to thank his pilot for the lift, offer condolences for the lost man, and congratulate the squadron for killing the *Hermes*... which had turned into a brief conversation in which he, and then his 'driver' had been exceedingly thankful the pirates hadn't had access to a *Rifleman*. Or worse yet, the pair of aerospace fighters a *Union* normally carried.

He'd almost spit-taken on the HUD when he'd gotten a look at the DVD's contents during the flight: someone had downloaded every single CBT-related .pdf BattleShop offered, so he'd have access to all

of his references (and more besides) while he was away from his own book-collection. It had occurred to him to wonder if the government had actually paid for those .pdfs; after all, what FASA/Fanpro copyrights meant in this situation was anybody's guess! (It had also occurred to him, with his usual vein of cynical humour, to ponder BattleShop's stability. Between the journals looking for reference data for their stories, intelligence agencies trying to update their threat-assessment files, and gamers and regular citizens looking to figure out what the FUCK was going ON!?!? in the wider universe, he fully expected that BattleShop's servers had been running almost red-hot trying to keep up with an unprecedented surge in new accounts created, files downloaded, and money rolling into its coffers. *Whatever financial troubles Fanpro might've had up until May 16, from May 17 they're probably set for the next decade or so. Legally, though? I'd bet that's another story!*)

When more government minders had shown up at his hotel-room door at seven the next morning, they'd brought him into the restaurant to meet several other CBT posters, mostly fellow Kiwis or travellers who'd thought to contact the authorities when they saw the news; every one of those 'mere' posters deferred to the 'PTB' in their midst, one of Fanpro's freelancers, a middle-aged expatriate Canadian who'd been yanked out of his Melbourne home by the Australian Federal Police and put on a trans-Tasman flight. However, while he was their recognised 'senior man', he was also the most shell-shocked: he'd been in the game since its release in the '80's and knew the most about its backstory - not to mention having spent several years helping to craft Fanpro's future products. *To be fair, I can't say I blame John for being a little sickly: reading and writing about the Word of Blake Jihad was incredible fun, but the idea of seeing it at close quarters is seriously fucking scary!*

Of course, John's agitation might have had something to do with the fact that he'd been hauled away from his wife and teenaged daughters in the middle of the night... or that he had a minder from the Aussie government: a muscular fellow in a suit with an ill-concealed sidearm and a wolf's eyes. 'Trace Coburn' fully admitted that he wasn't particularly astute when it came to people, but even he was pinging the minder as Aussie SAS. *Which begs the question: is he there to look out for John... or keep an eye on him?*

Now, here he was: self-appointed fan writer of 'Fighter of the Week', which had now turned him into the Brash government's Instant Expert on all things BattleTech and aerospace. Moreover, with John under a cloud, that meant the 'junior' posters deferred to his judgement, also making him the effective leader of the New Zealand government's CBT think-tank! *And now I know what Herb meant about 'herding cats'!* he thought half-sourly, not wanting to contemplate what awaited him in his e-mail account.

Which explained was why he was sitting in his hotel-room, typing frantically: after another long, wide-ranging brain-storming session, on top of writing a preliminary threat-assessment for 75 Squadron's Gryphon-drivers, he also had the responsibility of condensing the group's wild and woolly ideas into a coherent form for presentation to the bureaucrats. *I wonder what they'll make of my writing style? I can't say I'm the best-organised joker out there, and I'm not sure I could manage a formally-structured report if I tried, but at least I try to write documents that are entertaining to read!*

Still, I thought the Prime Minister was gonna choke when he saw our recommended additions to the terms he'd give the Yanks in exchange for signing the isorla over to them, he smiled thinly, his hands and hind-brain not needing supervision to type as he remembered that conversation. But, hey, they were waving a blank cheque at us: what were we supposed to do, think small?

"Miz Liz" and her creator in Seattle have thoroughly convinced me of the merits of economic power in warfare - not to mention how commerce is attracted to the infrastructure to support it - so why not get in on the ground floor? If those pirate bastards come back - and if they got any of our computer tech like the spooks think, they'll be back as sure as a T-800 - and we can take their DropShips intact, Earth's first commercial spaceport will be built by the ANZUS alliance in the Australian Outback and operated by "South Pacific Spacelift", a company jointly held by the Aussie and Kiwi governments. Tack on the subsequent port fees and duties on off-world imports and materials mined throughout the Sol system, and we're already looking at what is technically referred to as 'a fucking fortune'. Add that to a solemn agreement that Kiwi scientists will be equal partners in the reverse-engineering of all captured technologies and that

we'll have an inalienable (if non-voting) five-percent share in any and all commercial applications and ventures stemming therefrom - including the fusion-based power generation industry - and we're in line to become a friggin' superpower!

Heh: I always thought das Wunderkind Jack Ryan and his people were long overdue to have someone pull a fast one on 'em. Who knew it'd be the New Zealand government, acting at the prompting of a bloke who was working in a supermarket the day the 'Mechs landed?

Of course, we need to be able to mallet the bastards if they come back to Godzone, so the Government's immediate demands will be more use in the short-term. It looks like our weapons can get the job done against 'Mech-grade armour after all - unless they bring a lance of assault-'Mechs or something, but that'd fuck anything short of a mechanised brigade from a major nation anyway - so between the joint exercises and the U.S. footing the bill for another squadron of JAS-39s and emergency bulk supplies of Mavericks and JSOWs, the next bunch of Blackbeard slime-mould motherfrakkers who try their luck here are gonna rue the day their momma-slimes ever oozed 'em out....

But enough woolgathering. I need to get back to work on this: 75 Squadron's lost one man already, and I will NOT see any more of our lads die because I didn't give them a good sense for the threat.

Dropship *Drakon*
Earth-Moon Lagrange Point 1
20 May 3020

"Morning, Jane," Irdon Koltan said as he sailed onto the *Drakon's* bridge in microgravity. He found her sprawled in the Captain's chair, Mamoto having apparently overdosed on tranquilizers. The *Drakon's* formal captain was comatose in sick bay. Either that or he was hiding under his bunk. Irdon really didn't care which.

"Morning, Irdon," Jane replied. She was watching a bank of monitors showing the various transmissions from the locals. Most of the screens appeared to be tuned to news or talk shows. The common topic of all them of course, appeared to be the pirates themselves. "No missiles with nuclear warheads being shot at us yet," she added conversationally.

"That's good to know," Koltan replied in the same tone. Like Mamoto, the Elephant's captain seemed to have gone off the deep end. He seemed convinced that the locals had nuclear capability and were more than willing to use them. Thus, Captain Benson insisted that both ships maintained constant watch with weapons ready to shoot down any missiles sent their way. Both Koltan and Jane remained unconvinced; but they found it just easier to just humor the guy's paranoia even if it took away from their... personal time. "So, learn anything interesting?" Koltan asked, nodding at the monitors.

"Oh yeah," Jane replied blithely. "Did you know that Comstar has a secret conspiracy to try and drive the Inner Sphere into a new Stone Age and that they have a secret stash of combat Jumpships? Not only that, Katrina Steiner is going to marry her daughter off to Hanse Davion and combine their realms into a new super Successor State to dominate the Inner Sphere, only to have it ripped apart when their kids start a civil war for the throne. And then thirty years from now, the decedents of General Kerensky and the Star League army is going to come back to try and conquer the Inner Sphere only to fail miserably trying. And oh yeah, Wolf's Dragoons are really Star League army spies."

"Uh, what?" Koltan said, confused.

"Seriously, that's what they're talking about," Jane insisted with a laugh. "Someone has been feeding these guys a bunch of bad action stories for the past twenty years. They seriously thought that we and the Inner Sphere and everything was all make believe before we landed. Hell, they think the year is 2005 instead of 3020."

"That's... weird," Koltan said. "But anything about our guys?"

"Aside from confirmation of their capture? No, not really," Jane replied. "Their government is playing things pretty close to the chest. They're just letting out enough info to keep the public calm, I think."

"They're probably concerned about us eavesdropping," Koltan mused. "God knows, I'd suspect a trap if they told everyone where our people were being kept. Anything else?"

"Well they're still trying to reconcile our existence with the fiction," Jane told him with a shrug. "The most popular and plausible theory so far is that we had a misjump and have either gone back in time or into an alternate universe."

There was a pause in conversation.

"Er, we haven't had a misjump, have we?" Koltan asked nervously. The thought of not having a home to go back to was unnerving, especially since that would make the only possible place to go was the planet that he and his people had just ticked off.

"Not so far as I know, no," Jane reassured him.

"Oh, good," Koltan said, slightly relieved. "Anyway, I came up to invite you to the loot party. We're going to be opening the first containers soon. Wanna see what we got?"

"Sure!" Jane said, shutting down the monitors. "Let's go!"

Dropship Drakon
Earth-Moon Lagrange Point 1
20 May 3020

The surviving members of the *Drakon's* pirate company – as well as select officers from the *Elephant's* officers – had gathered in the Dropship's main cargo bay. They surrounded four containers secured to the deck in the middle of the bay. Three of the containers were anonymously boxes of sheet metal. The fourth was like the others except that it had wheels attached to one end and jacks extended at the front.

"About time you got here," Captain Benson said crabily when Koltan and Jane arrived. "Can we see what the take is now, or is it too soon for you?"

"Sorry, Captain," Koltan said, his tone not at all apologetic. "I just wanted to make sure everyone was up and out of sick bay before we started. You know how nasty things can get if someone thinks that they're not getting their fair share."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Benson said dismissively. "Jumped up gopro..." he muttered, not quite under his breath. He wasn't quite unheard.

"Hey, show some respect!" one Koltan's infantryman shouted angrily. "You wanna talk shit, YOU jump out of an open airlock and see if you survive."

"Now, now, people," Koltan said to his people with good humor. "I'm sure the good Captain here is just impatient like the rest of us." He pointed to the wheeled container. "Let's do this one first."

Obediently, Maria Burns and a couple of techs floated themselves over to the designated container's access hatch. There was a keyhole in the handle, and a quick tug by Burns on the handle confirmed the hatch's locked status.

"Well, darn, I can't get it," Burns said melodramatically. "Whatever

can I do?" She made a show of thinking hard. "I know, how about..."

"Get on with it already!" Benson barked. "Ow!" Someone had slapped him on the back side of his head. His eyes whipped around furiously, but the only person behind him was Jane Dietrich looking utterly innocent with her cast bound arm was nearest to him. It didn't seem possible that she could hit him with her good arm and get into that position with him seeing her move.

"Wow! That was easy," Burns exclaimed, drawing Benson's attention back to her. Burns was waving around an electric cutting torch dramatically. "I guess the owners of these things made them out of shoddy materials." She handed the torch back to one of her assistants. "Hmm, maybe there's nothing worthwhile here." She turned to her audience. "Are you sure you guys want see what's in here?"

A chorus of "yeses" bombarded the engineer as well as inarticulate cheers and whistles.

"Okay then," Burns said. Grabbing the still hot edges of the hole that she had cut .with a gloved hand, she braced herself with her legs on a convenient ledge built into the container hatch. "And behind Door Number One we have..." She tugged open the door and it slid up without resistance. "...canned goods? Um, it looks like stacks of canned beans, vegetables, fruit... Ooh! Strawberries!"

"What? We grabbed a bunch of groceries?" Benson complained, outraged. "Who picked this thing?"

"I did," Koltan replied evenly. "It was just outside the LZ, so I decided, why not?"

"But what good are groceries?" Benson persisted.

"I don't know about you, Captain," Koltan said, "but I'm sick and tired of standard rations. But if you want to give up your share, hey, more for the rest of us."

"Uh, wait a minute..." Benson stammered, backpedaling furiously... or trying to anyway.

"You heard the Captain, boys and girls," Koltan shouted to the crowd. "Let's get all this to the *Drakon's* galley! There's gonna be some good eating tonight!"

"But..." A jubilant cheer drowned out whatever Benson had been about to say.

* * *

"And behind Door Number Two, we have... a bunch of anonymous wooden boxes," Burns was saying.

"Aw..." chorused the crowd in disappointment.

"But wait!" Burns said dramatically. "Could there be something in the boxes?" The container was practically stuffed full with crates, barely leaving any room on the sides. Burns held out a hand. "Crowbar, Alex! And can I have some volunteers from the studio audience?"

Much grunting and manual labor later, one crate had been extracted from the container. Once that feat was accomplished, Burns popped its lid with the crowbar. The contents were... unexpected to say the least.

"Plush toys?" Burns said, bemused by the little blue humanoid with white hat and pants in her hand. "Hmm, kinda cute though." She turned it over and looked at the little white tag on it. "'Made in China'."

"No way," one of the sweaty volunteers griped. "This thing has way too much inertial mass to be just plush toys, there's gotta be something else in there!"

Several minutes later, the air of the cargo bay was polluted with clouds of cute plush dolls floating everywhere. Some of them had fallen apart at the rough treatment given to them by the pirates, and now fluffy white stuffing was also added to the pollution.

"Hey, this thing has a false bottom!" Burns announced, her lower half

sticking out of the now empty crate. Her words were followed by the crack of wood being splintered and torn. "Check this out, guys," she said as she exited the crate. In one hand was the crowbar, in the other was a weapon that hadn't been there before. "I think we grabbed someone's contraband."

"Another Kalashnikov clone?" Koltan said, somewhat amused as Burns handed him the weapon. On close examination, it was indeed one of the endless variations of the ancient AK-47. The venerable design had been in production as a cheap and easy to make infantry weapon for over a thousand years.

"And magazines," Burns added. "And plenty of ammo..." Her eyes played over the container and the crates within, her mind running some quick math. "If all the crates in there are like this one, you could probably outfit a small army."

"Nice to know I don't have to buy arms for new recruits," Koltan mused. He looked around the cluttered air and found he could barely see the far walls or ceiling. Something tickled his nose as a bit of fluff floated by. "Okay people!" he shouted. "Let's get this mess cleaned up before...before... ATCHOO!"

* * *

"Behind Door Number Three, we have... two ground cars?"

The third cargo container had two vehicles inside, civilian model ground cars. The first was a sleek black sports car with a slit cut in front. The second car was painted orange and more primitive looking, but had some kind of flag painted on top of its roof and numbers painted on its doors.

"Hmph, not much here," Koltan said eventually when it became clear that the cars were all the container had. He shook his head in disappointment. "I suppose we could give them to some self-styled pirate king as a gift."

"Yeah, we don't exactly have lots of open road in space," Benson agreed, equally disappointed.

"Eh, they can't all be winners," Koltan said. "Okay, let's lock it back up people!"

As darkness closed back in on the cars again, the slit in the sports car's hood lit up. A pulse of red light bobbed back and forth across the length of the slit several times before shutting back off.

* * *

"And finally, behind Door Number Four, we have... more boxes. And wonders of wonders, there's a manifest here." Burns took a sheet of paper that had been put in a plastic folder on the inside of the container's hatch door. "Let's see now... flat screen monitor, DVD player whatever that is, radio... hey, I think we hit the jackpot!"

"What?" "What is it?" Eager pirates crowded around Burns.

"Hold on," Burns told them. They appeared not to listen and crowded in even more. "Hey! Back off and give me some light. BACK OFF I SAID!!!" The last words were a shout and the pirates reeled back as Burns brandished her crowbar threateningly.

"So," Koltan said, completely unfazed by Burns. Then again, he hadn't been one of the ones crowding in. "You said something about a jackpot?"

"Yeah, this thing's full of what looks like consumer electronics," Burns replied.

"Okay, that's valuable," Koltan said thoughtfully. "And I suppose it'll sell, but why 'jackpot'? The number of people who actually have the money to buy this stuff out here in the Periphery isn't all that great."

"Well according to this," Burns said, waving the manifest, "there be computers in here."

That got everyone's attention. Computers of any kind were rare. They were essentially lostech, with only primitive mainframes still being manufactured on a few select worlds deep into the Inner Sphere. Out

here on the Periphery, the only computers still in operation were the minimum required to run Dropships and Jumpships, and of course the ones that had to support pirate mech operations. If any of those died, then there were absolutely no replacements except what you could salvage or more likely, steal from someone else.

"Okay, this I gotta see," Koltan muttered. "Which boxes are they in?"

Burns turned back to look at the container. It was stuffed with boxes of all shapes and sizes, like some demented riddler had decided to create the ultimate three dimensional jigsaw puzzle. She threw Koltan a look that practically screamed, "Isn't it obvious?"

"Right," Koltan said. "Okay, people! Start emptying this thing!" He paused then quickly added, "CAREFULLY!"

* * *

"This is a computer?" Koltan said skeptically, handling the briefcase sized box; it even had a little plastic handle on the side. Real computers were mainframes. The smallest ones were typically the size of a desk. Most were the size of refrigerators or larger and massed tons. The little thing in his hand couldn't be more than a dumb terminal, which were damned useless without mainframes to connect to.

"That's what it says on the box," Burns said doubtfully handling her own box of dubious computer hardware.

"I suppose that worse case scenario, we could use these to replace some of the broken terminals around the *Drakon*," Jane mused, examining her own box. She did a double take. "Hey, Maria, check the stats on the back of the box."

"Huh, fifteen quotation mark monitor," Burns read aloud. She looked up, confused. "What's the quotation mark supposed to be? And why is there only one?"

"Keep reading," Jane insisted.

"One point seven gigahertz processor?" Burns read, disbelievingly.
"Five hundred twelve megabyte ess dee arr ay em, whatever that is."

"I think that might be random access memory," Jane told her.

"No way!" Burns disagreed, her eyes not leaving her box. "A sixty gigabyte hard drive? Jane, this has got to be a hoax! It's impossible."

"I don't think so," Jane said thoughtfully. "This is stuff being bought and sold on the planet here, right?"

"I guess. We just grabbed containers at random," Koltan admitted.
"What's the problem?"

"The problem is that you simply can't fit computers this powerful into packages this small!" Burns told him. "It's simply not physically possible!"

"Why?" Koltan asked, mystified.

"Because computing power reached the maximum miniaturization in the late twentieth century," Burns said. "There was simply no way to get mainframes any more compact without losing functionality somewhere. Anything smaller simply had to become special purpose machines, kinda like the computer systems in mechs for example. And even then you couldn't fit this much computing power in this tiny a package!"

"I dunno," Jane mused. "The Star League were rumored to have some awesome stuff. And maybe these things were purpose made for something."

"How do we determine what for?" Koltan asked.

"Only way to do that would be to open the box and turn it on," Jane said. She wiggled her cast bound, broken arm. "Um, one of you guys is going to have to do that."

Several minutes later, a box was opened. The "computer" inside was smaller than expected; a good half of the box's volume was taken up

with accessories, pamphlets, and some kind of foam padding.

Burns turned the unfamiliar device over and around, examining it at all angles. "How do you turn this thing on?" she asked plaintively.

"I got a better question," Jane said, holding up something that looked like a torture device. "Where do you plug this in?"

Koltan shook his head in bemusement, then grabbed what looked like a little plastic book floating past his head. He read the title. "Pirates of the Caribbean?"

Dropship Drakon
Earth-Moon Lagrange Point 1
23 May 3025

"All hands," Captain's Benson's voice said over every speaker on both the *Drakon* and the *Elephant*, "standby for jump in T minus five minutes... mark."

"Jane," Koltan said as he sailed onto the *Drakon*'s bridge. "Everything secure up here?"

"Mmm-hmm," Jane replied absently, her eyes glued to the screen in front of her. But it wasn't one of the bridge monitors. It was an odd looking device that looked something like a keyboard attached to a monitor. It took a moment for Koltan to recognize the thing as one of the looted "computers". Small pamphlets and booklets floated around her.

"I see you managed to figure out how to get it working," Koltan commented, his eyes tracing a long cable running from the computer to a convenient power outlet where an adapter had been used to get it plugged in.

"Hang on a sec, Irdon," Jane told him, eyes not leaving the screen.

Irrked at Jane's inattention and curious about what she was working on, Koltan peeked over her shoulder. The most obvious thing he could see was a gray grid that dominated the screen. Most of the grid squares were filled with an array of multi-colored numbers. Some squares were blank and dark gray. Other blank squares were a lighter grey, though not very many; Koltan had the distinct impression that the light gray squares were raised above the elevation of the other squares, a neat trick for a 2D screen.

Jane did something that moved a pointer over a light grey square. With a tap, the square turned an angry red with a black circle thing in it. Other squares did the same. A happy face above the grid changed into something less than happy.

"Nooooo!" Jane wailed in despair. "I almost had it!"

"Had what?" Koltan asked, concerned. "Was it something important?"

"Yes! No!" Jane said angrily. She seemed to search for words "Ah, you wouldn't understand."

"Okay, if you say so," Koltan said slowly, deciding not to push. He looked for a safer topic. "Why is this thing duct taped down?"

"Microgravity," Jane replied. "This thing has moving parts."

"Moving parts? In a computer?"

"Yeah, it gets pretty warm after a while," Jane told him grumpily as she did something to make the grid disappear. What replaced it was some picture of a rolling meadow. "I think there's a fan in there to keep it cool. I dunno what other than the screen could be generating the heat though, but it's definitely not just the screen."

"T minus one minute," Benson announced.

"Wait, back up a moment," Koltan said. "What do moving parts have to do with duct tape?"

"Action and reaction of course," Jane said, as if it were obvious. "Fan spins one way; the rest of the machine wants to spin in the other. And in microgravity, the machine will spin unless secured to something. I already broke one of these things discovering that little fact."

"Broke?" Koltan echoed. "How?"

"It spun itself into a bulkhead," Jane answered. She shook her head in wondering contempt. "These things are way more fragile than any computer has a right to be. And it looks like the operating system is optimized for single users only, however much sense that makes. It looks like Maria was right; the locals did compromise to get all this computing power in such a tiny package."

"T-minus ten seconds."

"So what were you doing when I came in?" Koltan asked. "Cracking some esoteric security code?"

"Five. Four..."

"Ah..." Jane stammered, folding down the computer's screen. It seemed like she was trying to evade the question.

"Three. Two..."

"Jane," Koltan began, annoyed. "Don't make me..."

"One. JU..."

* * *

The Jumpship *White Elephant* and attached *Dropship Drakon* vanished in a globular cloud of electromagnetic static that radiated from the low end radio bands to the middle of visible spectrum. The bubble lasted for some thirty seconds before vanishing, leaving nothing behind to indicate that anything had ever been there.

Around Earth, dozens of satellites watched the event. A good many belonged to intelligence agencies and had powerful cameras whose mission had been switched from watching the Earth below to the mysterious interloper from beyond. Dozens more belonged to various scientific agencies, powerful sensors retasked from observing distant astronomical phenomena to observing the energy output of advanced technology. Finally, there were the numerous civilian satellites, streaming video to curious people the world over.

Five minutes after the pirates' departure, the video of their jump was on YouTube. Less than an hour later, YouTube crashed due to the sheer number of users trying to accessing this one video on the website.

//25 May, 2005, Classified Location, US//

The cockpit of the... err, aggressively reacquired Hunchback was quiet as its test pilot paused, to listen to the radio and civilian chatter from the new communications equipment hastily retrofitted into the back, waiting. He had asked to get this slot specifically so that he could be the first to fully test out Earth's first taste of 'advanced technology'. Advanced juryrigging, sure, technology, probably not so much.

He had never seen so much duct tape in all his life. It seemed to hold up half the gauges and alert light banks, silvery tendrils of its unshakable grip twisting across the corrugated metal of the small deck space below him. "Is it gone, yet?"

"Negative. Stand by." The grainy radio transmission burbled over the headset, which had been strapped to the neuro-helmet, the Army Sergeant leaning back, feeling the slight shift of the mech below him. At least it was responsive as it was supposed to be. He flicked at one of the boxes, watching a low ammo light flicker. Meh.

"Standing by Roughrider Mike." Sergeant Andre Davis scuffed at the concrete floor of the warehouse hanger, listening to concrete scraping under the rough heel of the Hunchback's foot. He tapped what he figured must have once been the thermal imager controls, grumbling as he flicked carefully at a wire that was protruding out of a connection socket. The small panel of indicators above the set of knobs flickered for a moment, cutting back out. He scribbled down a note on his pad, warily watching the armtip. He tapped the thermal imaging controls again, before picking up his 'mechanical persuasion', and thumping the box with the side of his adjustable wrench, watching the lights jump back on, glowing a greenish amber in the dark cockpit. A few more scribbles followed.

"This is Roughrider Mike. Skies are now clear. You are clear for extended test." The sound of the command post was a welcome one, as he gingerly wobbled forward, the clear night echoing with the

sound of a medium mech finally back in the hands of people who would actually look after it.

"Hell, 'bout damn time." The lurching of the cockpit was surprisingly gentle, as he began tentatively taking a more easy gait with the mech, feeling it responding naturally to his thoughts.

"What was that, Bandit 60?"

"Nothing, Roughrider mike. Taking the perimeter trail." Davis let it lope further out, having gotten off the main roads, and out into the woods, carefully taking it into the sparse pine. A careful swat found a thick gnarled tree pushed half way out of the ground, as he piloted his way through the maze of 3rd and 4th growth trees.

He didn't even want to consider what nefarious purposes the ungainly and ugly vehicle had seen over the years, as his mind picked up on instinctive responses that the mech wanted out of him. It was... surprisingly intuitive, as he swept his gaze across the control board, the thermal nightvision lighting up the night. It was amazing that it even worked. Chalk one up to the reliability of IS tech.

"Bandit 60, spotters show you moving into the woods, do you have optics?"

"Rodger Roughrider Mike. The thermal nightvision needed some persuasion." The feeling of the mech staggering as it tripped over an old logjam threw the sergeant off for a moment, as he grabbed onto the nearest big tree with the mech's stubby hand. He proceeded to self-note to check the ground more often. Handled like a drunk on a dingy in the middle of Hurricane Ivan, if one wasn't careful.

He shook his head, before turning around in the thick woods. Probably best to hang off on difficult piloting classes 101 and 102 until he figured out how not to do the twostep bellyflop. Pirates could pilot, he'd have to give them that. Cracking wood noises filled the air, as he shoved aside a young, flimsy tree, listening to it

whipping back against the hunchback's hull. The sudden neardarkness was far less welcome, though.

"Joy." He tabbed the talk button on the SINGARS, as he brought his mechanical pursuasion back out, thumping the thermal box again, unhappily noting that it failed to work this time. "Roughrider mike, returning to the nest. Thermal imaging has failed. Clear the road." He grumbled as he killed his mike, reaching up to turn down the cockpit lighting a tad more, as he looked up through the windows into the oddly... menacing night sky. The unfamiliar night sky. None of the constelations were right anymore. Why?

"Oh, that can't be good. We are in soooo much trouble."

Projection room
Unidentified Research Institute
May 19th, 2005

Dr. Mallard was led to a seat and given a folder by one of the ever present minders. When he arrived this morning at the lecture hall for "Materials Engineering 402", the dean was already waiting for him. While that was most assuredly strange, the three suits with shades and ear pieces were stranger still.

He knew they talked, rather cordially, but details were vague. He vaguely recalled the dean saying he, Mallard, was now on loan to the US government and not to worry, he would keep his chair and everything was paid for. In fact he should be proud for the chance and for bringing the university a new wing. Everything after that passed by in a blur. A short stop at his home to collect an over night bag and he was bundled on a plane to this place. Mallard still didn't know what chance the dean was talking about.

When he was seated, a rather clean cut middle aged man started speaking at the front of the room.

"Now that everyone is here, let me welcome you. I am Major Khalid McDonald," the man identified himself. On the screen a few scenes of some science fiction show started playing. It looked really well done, even if the giant robots were a bit over the top.

"If you followed the news, you might already recognize some of these images. Let me assure this no hoax or PR gag for a new show. As far as we can tell at this point, it was a genuine pirate raid. We were able to repel the raid, but they managed to abscond with numerous shipping containers."

"The day after tomorrow the two damaged machines will arrive here and be available for study. That is why you were invited. All of you are distinguished experts in materials science." At this point Mallard looked around and recognized most of the faces. Others doing the same reassured him, he was not the only one overwhelmed by this invitation.

"We need more information about their capabilities, because there will be a next time. And we might not be as lucky again. My assistants have distributed paperwork detailing the terms for our research group. Be sure to read and sign them by tomorrow if you want to join this project. I hope to see you all again day after tomorrow."

Office of Colonel Reynard
Unidentified Research Institute
June 9th, 2005

Khalid McDonald entered the waiting room to the office of Colonel Fergus Reynard.

"You can go right in. Colonel Reynard is expecting you."

Once Khalid was through the door he was greeted by his superior. "At ease. We are waiting for the representative of the Joint Chiefs. Have the civilians settled finally in?"

"Well mostly. Now they are only twice as bad as our own researchers. I always thought riding herd on ours was bad, but you wont hear me complain about them again." McDonald answered.

A knock on the door interrupted further conversation. On Reynard's "Enter" an unknown Brigadier General entered. "At ease. My name is Robert Shanks. Timmons had a nasty break, so i am here today for the weekly report. I am on a tight schedule, so give me an overview for the last week."

At a look from Colonel Reynard, Major McDonald started.

"The armor work group gave their preliminary report yesterday. It is a very good ablative armor. And compared to ours incredible resistant to piercing. It is essentially a big sandwich, you understand, like Chobham armor."

At McDonald's inquiring look, Shanks provided. "I am familiar with the concept. How soon can we make the armor in numbers? We can

make it, right?"

"The report estimates about three to five years till we can make a copy in meaningful amounts. And how well our home produced variant will stack up against the real deal is still open. Unless we make some breakthroughs or find a source on their production processes, it will definitely be worse. The good news is that we should be able to start enhancing our armor for heat resistance in the next 9 to 15 months."

"Forgive me, but what exactly hampers our copy?" Shanks interrupted.

"First there are some alloys we can't yet produce in the quality present in BT armor. The bigger problem are the carbon nanotubes. We can't consistently make the required lengths in bulk. And we don't know how produce the kind weaves found in our samples. We will have to use bulk nanotubes for that layer." McDonald finished.

Reynard continues, "That is all the new developments. The other groups are still slowly advancing. It would help immensely if the intel pukes, pardon my language, would finally give us access to the woman, Zumross. The interviews suggest she is the most technically inclined of the group and she is already awake for two weeks."

"Send my office a catalog of questions and problems and i will see about getting your access. If that is all? I will be on my way."

One of Countless Observatories
Earth
25 May 2005, 08.34am EST

"What do you mean, they're not there anymore?" the tone of the question implied an unspoken "idiot" at its end.

"I meant just what I said." Gregori adjusted his glasses. "The - stars - are - not - there - anymore. It's subtle for most, but about 30 hours ago, the entire sky suddenly... changed. We already confirmed it - three times."

Just a few weeks ago this would have been replied to by a breathless "Impossible", followed by a short pause and the question what the hell the observatory's personnel were thinking to believe their boss would fall for such a stupid prank.

Of course that had been before New Zealand had been raided by a bunch of futuristic giant robots from space that apparently weren't really robots but "Battlemechs", and were supposed to be completely fictional. Nowadays, things were different.

"Show me."

White House Situation Room
Washington DC
United States of America
Earth
25 May 2005, 11.02am EST

This was getting tiresome, Jack Ryan decided.

Joint Chiefs dancing in their seats like nervous little children – Check

Entire Staff assembled and waiting with visibly strained nerves –
Check

General sense of foreboding, and all eyes directed on the guy in charge who would hopefully know how to fix "it", whatever "it" was –
Check

Yep! Something bad had happened. It really sucked to be president sometimes.

"So... what is it all about this time? Are we being invaded by the Legions of Hell under the command of General Abigor?

"That might be less troublesome than what we're potentially facing, Mr. President. But I'm afraid, most likely, we're going to have more mecha trouble in the near future." NASA's chief Administrator and the presidents senior space science advisor replied.

"Mechs." one of the Joint Chiefs pedantically corrected. "They're called mechs, or Battlemechs. Mechas are the bigger Japanese ones, who move and look like overgrown samurai." He had spent days reading everything Battletech and similar after Auckland, and was just itching for an opportunity to show his new knowledge.

"Yes, mechs then..." the administrator continued, rolling his eyes. "Anyway, I'm sure by now you have all heard the theory that those pirates who raided Auckland had some kind of missjump – a malfunction of their faster than light system – and were somehow brought into our reality."

Everyone around the table slowly nodded. That seemed indeed the most plausible possibility in this wholly implausible situation.

"I'm afraid... I'm afraid this is not the case." he opened his briefcase and took a thick file of something that looked like pictures of space, along with all kinds of written reports and mathematical calculations. "It isn't the pirates who had a missjump – it's us."

Oxford, Oxfordshire
United Kingdom
Earth
June 1st 2005

"Gentleman," Dr. Mellard Willson said with his Staffordshire accent as he glanced around in the large auditorium, a polite cough reminding him that he had forgotten something." Ladies."

The auditorium of the University of Oxford was packed with people, so much that a good number had to stand.

"I believe we all know why we are here," he noted, getting a good number of people to nod in response.

Behind him an image of the JET fusion reactor appeared on the large white wall.

"This is currently one of the most advanced fusion reactors we have build," he noted dryly." And yet we are not able to get more than a minute of sustained fusion reaction from it. Its the size of a warehouse and uses a D-T fuel mix to do work."

The image behind him switched to what looked like a block of metal that appeared to have gotten dropped quite a few times from a large height and than beaten with a dozen or more sledge hammers for two or three hours.

"This is one of currently four of the most advanced fusion reactors on this planet. Its capable of several days, if not weeks, month or years of sustained function. Its about the size of a small car and uses a H-H fuel. And obviously its not from this planet."

That made a few people laugh, while others changed their heads. Behind Willson the image changed again showing the Money Bin of one Scrouge McDuck.

"And this is about the amount of money that is currently thrown our way to try and get our fusion reactors..."

The image once again switched to the image of JET.

"... to work like this fusion reactor."

The image switched back to the battered block of metal.

"Not only that but if possible we are to shrink this..."

The image went back to the JET.

"...to the size of this."

The image once again switched to the battered block of metal.

"So that we can fit that..."

The JET image.

"...into this."

The image changed to something else and the snickers in the audience made Willson turn around to look at the image. It showed what appeared to be an Evangelion from Neon Genesis Evangelion with its face replaced by a scribbled wide open red mouth, googly eyes and the words 'IM CHAGING MA LAZA' written above it.

Willson frowned and glared offstage. More snickers went through the audience and the image changed to something else, showing a concept drawing of a Mammoth tank for the next Command and Conquer game.

"Better," Willson made and shook his head, before turning back to the audience.

"I think its time to begin. The reactor from the Stinger that was downed in New Zealand had been transported to Culham and we are ready to take it apart. Hopefully we manage to get this done in the next three years..."

The White House
Washington DC
Earth
5 June 2005

"What's this?" President Ryan asked when the thick manila folder was dropped on the desk in front of him.

"This, Mister President, is the best proposal for United States' – and Planet Earth's for that matter - first ever anti-BT space defense system," General Brian Meyers, USAF, told his Commander in Chief. Meyers currently headed the Pentagon's acquisition department.

"It's been less than three weeks since the Pirates first showed up," Ryan noted. "And it's been less than two since the sky changed. That was quick."

"Well, we were in a hurry," Meyers said. "So we lit a fire under the engineers, told them that we needed some kind of space defense right now." He pointed at the folder. "And this is the result."

"Okay, give me the highlights," Ryan said, opening the folder and flipping through a few pages. "What is it exactly?"

"It's a space based missile launch system," Meyers told him. "Using nothing but off the shelf parts, we put a bunch of missile launchers in space and set them to fire on command. The launcher is little more than a box, an RCS system, and some basic electronics. The missile is your basic rocket motor like the ones we've built for decades with some addition RCS thrusters so that it can make course corrections to chase a target. The warhead can be anything, but the recommended payload is a nuclear warhead. If we put this in production, we've got all those nukes from the disarmament in cold storage that we can use. In fact, the biggest production bottleneck is simply lifting enough of these things into orbit."

"And this is going to be effective?" Ryan asked thoughtfully.

"According to our... 'experts'," Meyers grimaced at calling a bunch of

kids "experts", "only the largest and most powerful BT warships can stand up to nukes. And if the pirates we captured weren't fibbing about the date and our location, then none of our nearest neighbors have those ships."

"What's the bad news?" Ryan asked. "C'mon. There's always bad news. What is it?"

"Testing... is going to be a bitch, pardon my language, sir," Meyers replied. "Our projected lift capacity for the near future is going to be extremely limited, even with us and all our allies sending stuff up as fast as we can. There's no way to really test the targeting system short of actually firing the missiles once they're up there. Given that we anticipate a limited time to actually deploy before the next pirate shows up, that means that every missile fired in testing is one that won't be there when the ball goes up. And that's going to hurt.

"And to top it off, the missiles are going to have a pretty limited range given the area that they have to cover," Meyers continued. "They've got enough fuel for a few hundred miles at best. Beyond that, all they can do is coast, which means they're probably dead easy for BT weapons to shoot down assuming that they don't just dodge it. The missile needs to have fuel for the entire attack run to even have a chance of reaching its target. And even then, it's estimated that depending on how the target is armed, we're going to need salvos of three to ten missiles just to guarantee at least one reaching its target."

"Can anything be done to improve that?"

"With our current technology? No, Mister President," Meyers said. "The only way to improve range would be to add more fuel to each missile. But the more fuel we add, the fewer missiles that we can actually put into space ahead of time."

"And this is the best system we can make in the short term?" At Meyers' nod, Ryan went on. "This may take some political wrangling. There are treaties to prevent exactly this kind of thing. Putting nukes in space is going to make our allies nervous. Hell, it makes me nervous." Ryan turned to his Secretary of State. "Collin, how do you

think our allies will react to this?"

"Pretty good actually," the Secretary of State chuckled. He produced his own thick manila folder. "The Russian ambassador gave me this this morning. It's *their* proposal for a space defense system and it's almost exactly like the one the good general here just finished describing."

White Sands Missile Range
New Mexico
Earth
7th June 2005

US Army Brigadier General Alexander Miller looked over the apparatus that was build on top of the 45 feet container and than turned to face US Navy Captain David Graham. Around them several more people worked on the last bits and pieces before they could start with the test. Those people were an uneven mix of people of the Army, the Air Force, the Navy and several contractors from Boeing and Northrop Grumman.

"So what can you tell me about it?" he wondered, glancing over towards the container again.

"As far as we can tell its some sort of hybrid laser system," Graham noted and next to them the doors of the container were opened for a moment, allowing Miller to have a glance at the rear assembly of the Medium Laser the Kiwis had managed to salvage from one of the 'Mechs down in Kiwiland.

Miller had been working on the Laser Project of the Army and so he knew a little about lasers.

"Hybrid Laser? Of what sort?"

"An array of solid state lasers pumping an helium-neon lasing medium. Its rather simple and ingenious way getting a laser to work. It something we could do easily."

Miller raised an eyebrow.

"I sense a 'but' there."

Graham nodded.

"There is," said with a sigh. " Multiple in fact."

The door was closed and siren began to blare.

"Firing test is commercing in five minutes," a voice called out over improvised speakers." Please get to the bunkers."

"What sort of problems?"

"First of all energy requirements," Graham said." You know that we need several generators and a large capacitor bank to get his one to work. Thankfully we can grab the generators of our own work here."

Miller nodded. Their own laser projects here. It wasn't only the Navy's MIRACL, but also THEL and the prototype lasers build with Russian specs.

He shook his head. Thermal bloom still presented a problem.

"Second is the construction. The Helium-Neon gas is contained inside a crystal tube and the solid state lasers are really solid. We could drop them from ten miles up, hook them up to energy and they would work. We can't do that without some serious work before building them."

Miller frowned as he ducked lightly to get into the control bunker, absentmindedly grabbing a pair of safety goggles.

"And third?"

"Waste heat. We needed to hook the laser up to a very extensive cooling system just to test it."

"Thirty seconds until test."

"So we could build them," Miller noted.

"Yes, but they would be far from being mobile. Safe for a bucketwheel extractor perhaps."

"Which would have many people scream BOLO..."

Graham chuckled and they turned towards the small view slit in the face of the bunker.

"What are you going to fire it at?"

Graham smirked.

"Nothing big, we thought we try to get one satellite from GEO that is clogging up the place after going out. NORAD knows and gave us green light."

"Fire in Three..."

Miller blinked.

"Two..."

"GEO?"

"One..."

Graham just grinned and watched how the beam director they had from an Airborne Laser made some minute last moment changes.

"Ignition."

A high pitched whine was heard as a red beam of light stood in the air for a second, leaving the beam director smoking lightly and bend out of shape from the heat of the beam.

"Bingo," someone yelled from behind. "Target destroyed."

Graham and Miller turned to glance at a computer display that showed a life feed from one of the Keyhole satellites that was directed to film the test. At first it showed a simple communication satellite that than simply melted and was blown apart from the energy of the beam.

"Oh, and it seems like the optics of the laser are not all that good compared to ours. Could be that they are optimised for short range

ground combat..."

Random Gaming Store
Western Hemisphere
Earth
June 23 2005

The salesclerk was bored. It was a quiet day and there weren't many customers. She had immersed herself in reading the last days order list and barely noticed it when the young man walked up to the counter and pointed at the opened book in his hands.

"That's a joke, right? Please tell me this is a joke." His voice was a bit faint, almost pleading.

She looked up from what she was doing to be faced with a stereotypical geek of maybe 20 years. She recognized him, he was one of the handful of local Battletech enthusiasts who always made the store quite a profit when they visited (though less so than in the past, this being the age of the internet).

In his hands he was holding the newest revision of "Classic Battletech Universe". The opened page had the headline "The Battlemech" and pictures of the very same. She started reading the description printed under the pictures.

"The modern Battlemech was created in complete disregard of more than three thousand years of battlefield technology development. Vulnerable, expensive and combining an arsenal of almost entirely ineffective weapons with an unforgivable lack of maneuverability, the Battlemech is without doubt the most overcomplicated piece of junk ever produced. Demonstrating the utter lack of capability in thirty-first century warfare, the Battlemech seems destined to be inevitably slaughtered by any opposing force in huge numbers..."

The White House
Washington DC

Earth

June 24 2005

The phone ringed. It was answered almost immediately, the man sitting at the desk in the middle of the oval room clearly eager to hear whatever news it would bring.

"Ah yes, Doctor Hill. I've been waiting for your call. Do you have the results? Did it work?" President Ryan asked, with just a tiny bit of hope in his eyes.

"I'm afraid not. Quasimodo has shown no signs of spontaneously collapsing." the answer came from the other end of the line. "Nor have the salvaged pieces of armor suddenly acquired the density and strength of styrofoam. And the lasers still cut through Chobham like butter."

"That's... unfortunate. Anyway, thank you for informing me so quickly Doctor. I look forward to reading your next report."

After hanging up the president opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out the piece of paper were he had previously written down all the various theories and explanations anyone had been able to come up with for the planet's current situation. He took a pencil and crossed out the "Physically transported into game universe" theory right under "Alien Space Bats".

"Dammit" he muttered, "why can't things ever be easy?" Now how to explain to Jack Jr. and Sally that he had forced Catalyst Game Labs to nerf their favorite pastime in the hope of saving the Earth?

NBC Studios
New York, New York
Earth
29 June 2005(3020?)

"In a universe turned upside down, many of us have been asking ourselves, what's real? Just last month, our planet was invaded by what had been until then assumed to be fictional machines. It was at first assumed that the invaders had by some accident crossed over into our universe from theirs. That theory appeared to have been proven wrong when several days after the surviving invaders left, the sky changed in what has popularly become known as the 'Isot Event'. Seeking information on this, our very own Anne Curie sought out expert opinion and interviewed Physics professor James Armand of Harvard. Here it is now."

"So, Professor Armand, the Isot Event has everyone concerned. The sky changed which people seemed to take as proof that we've been moved into another universe. But if the sky changed after these 'pirates' left, doesn't that mean we and the pirates are no longer in the same universe?"

"Unfortunately, Miss Curie, no it doesn't. What you have to understand is that the speed of light is not instantaneous. It takes years for light to cross the gulf between stars. So when look up at the stars, we see them not as they are now, but as they were many, many years ago. So when we saw the Isot event, it did not happen at that very moment, but long ago. It was only last month that the light from change reached us."

"But how can you tell how long ago the Isot was? I've heard figures of 50 years, but I'm sure some of our viewers are confused on how that figure was deduced."

"It's quite simple. We look to the stars again. Every object that we can see within approximately 50 light years remains unchanged. Beyond that, the sky is changed almost beyond recognition, but not quite. The galaxies beyond our own appear to remain unchanged so that we

know we are still in our own. Although our position within our galaxy appears to have shifted by this so-called 'Isot' by over a thousand lightyears although an exact number must wait as astronomers refine our data."

"And what is the origin of the word 'Isot'? Forgive me, but I haven't been able to find the origin of the word."

"I am given to understand that 'Isot' is an acronym for some trash novel that has our general situation as a plot device. Some island is sent through time and must make their way through an unfamiliar era while surrounded by hostile people native to world of their new time."

"That certainly seems to have been what happened to us. But it seems just bizarre that we've been thrown into a universe described by the game Battletech. How is that possible, Professor?"

"My dear, you're looking at it backwards. Consider: according to our observations, the Isot happened fifty years ago. The game Battletech is only a mere twenty years old. Logically then, the Pirates who attacked New Zealand a month ago are not the first visitors from the wider universe that we have received. Twenty years ago, someone must have come and provided the original story idea. But the original Battletech stories started in the year 3025. I am given to understand that in the wider universe, it is currently the year 3020. How can a thirty first century writer write about events that have not happened yet?"

"I don't know, Professor."

"Logically, our hypothetical visitor can't predict the future. Therefore, our Battletech fiction is just that fiction. In the Inner Sphere, such fiction would probably be regarded as technothriller novels, or perhaps soap opera, maybe even science fiction, all with a hefty dose of X-Files type conspiracy theory thrown in. It is certainly not the wealth of intelligence data as some people might suggest."

"So do you have any idea who this immigrant author from the BT universe might be?"

"Miss Curie, I am a physicist, not a spy. I wouldn't know anything about that, although I imagine that the government is looking for this person assuming they haven't already detained him."

CIA Headquarters
Virginia
Earth

"This can't be right."

"What can't be right?"

"Look at this. Now, we've been interrogating the pirates we've captured about the Inner Sphere, right?"

"Right. But there knowledge is pretty limited to the 'What everyone knows' category. Sometimes they don't even know that much."

"Okay, yeah, but look at this. They confirmed that the mercenary unit Wolf's Dragoons showed up out of nowhere with five full regiments of mechs in the year 3005."

"Okay, yeah, that matches the info from the BT Source Books. So?"

"So according to the pirates and clocks in the captured mechs, it is currently the year 3020."

"What's your point?"

"My point is that in this universe, the Dragoons showed up in the Inner Sphere fifteen years ago. But the novel in which first features the Dragoons was published in 1988, seventeen years ago. If the BT fiction was really written by someone native to this time, how in the hell did they predict the arrival of the Dragoons *two years before it really happened?*"

"Uh... our mystery author was a Clanner?"

NBC Studios

"And in other news, a riot broke out in London when rumors spread of a 'blue police box materializing out of thin air' and an 'exotically dressed Doctor'. The London Police have announced that there was no such box or doctor and that the original rumor was a hoax originally started by a young woman for reasons unknown."

July 2, 2005
Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona,
United States, Earth

"Alright people." the General said, as he surveyed the room. "You all know about the landing in New Zealand so I won't get into that here. The reason I've called this meeting is because we have been tasked to come up with anti-mech tactics. The Secretary of the Air Force has noticed that the New Zealanders managed to takeout a mech with a couple of JAS 39 'Gripen' fighters, it is his belief that if the New Zealanders can do it with those, then we can do it better."

"The Enemy we will be facing is like nothing you have ever faced before, they hit hard and are tough beyond belief. The mech the fighters destroyed in New Zealand was hit by four," the general held up four fingers, "count them FOUR Naval Variant Mavericks. That's what it took to take one of these mechs down, Twelve Hundred pounds of high explosives."

He looked over the men and women in front of him.

"If that wasn't bad enough, every one of these mechs must be assumed to also be anti-air capable. And with the weapons load out they carry, any mech can shoot you down with a single shot if they manage to land a direct hit on your plane. The only thing we have in our favor is the fact that the targeting systems are somewhat inaccurate and seem to be terminally short-sighted"

He waited out the groans of dismay and cursing which filled the room as they digested the information he'd given them.

"So far two main strategies have been suggested to deal with another landing in the future:

The First Suggestion is for another landing of a small number of mechs or if a small group of mechs breaks off of a larger force. Simply put, we swarm them. We hit them from multiple directions and take them out before they know we're in the area.

The Second Suggestion is for large groups of mechs which would be too dangerous to approach, or an invasion force. In this case we would rely on teams of Forward Air Controllers on the ground to paint the mechs and allow us to engage at maximum range, which should be beyond the range of any mech."

A man called out "Should, Sir?"

The General gave a grim smile.

"If the targeting systems we've seen are any indication of what's a standard system we will be fine, if they are cheap knockoffs things will be harder."

"Before I let you go there is one last thing, do not focus solely on squadron level tactics. There is a possibility of a large scale invasion sometime in the future, so when working on tactical ideas include the possibility of multiple squadrons and even multiple wings working together."

"Multiple Wings, Sir?" a Major asked.

The General grinned.

"It seems that the thought of pirates being able to drop onto any city in the world has deeply frightened our representatives in Congress. So they are more or less giving us a blank check to buy whatever we need to protect them. As such one of the things you will be hearing about in the next week or so, is that the Air Force will be placing an order for about fourteen hundred more F-16s, with the possibility of more orders in the future. In the meantime we will be pulling every aircraft out of the bone yard that can mount a Maverick. Hell, they are even talking about rebuilding the A-10 production lines."

"The World may not have been prepared for those pirates the first time, but by God we'll ready for them if they return."

**Prisoner Detention Barracks
Groom Lake Facility, Nevada
Earth
16 July 3020**

Captain Burgess Hale, dispossessed Mechwarrior, was bored.

Boredom was not an emotion that he had ever expected to feel while being captive of backwater Periphery barbarians. Wracking pain from being tortured? Yes. Misery? Yes. Hunger and privation? Yes. Fear? Yes. But his current captors had confounded his expectations.

Hale wasn't miserable except insofar that he was a prisoner. Instead of being thrown in some dank dungeon, his people had been given their own facility. True, they were little more than converted storage containers (oh, the irony!) with air conditioners and bunks installed surrounded by a chain link fence, razor wire, and towers with armed guards. But the facilities had been unreasonably clean and none of the guards had ever tried to have "fun" with the prisoners. And while the weather was too hot for his taste, there was plenty of drinking water available despite that idiot Jankowicz almost killing himself from not drinking enough.

Hale wasn't starving. It didn't even seem to occur to his captors to deprive the prisoners of food. And while not four star restaurant quality, the food that was provided was still better than the field rations he was used to. Some of it was even pretty tasty. In fact, some overheard comments from the guards indicated that the food he had been getting was this world's idea of field rations.

He wasn't afraid. Well he had been for the first few weeks. Hale had been afraid of being tortured or just executed if he didn't tell his interrogators what they wanted to know. But after his limited store of useful information dried up, he was interrogated less and less. Hale was surprised that he and his people weren't simply disposed with. In fact, he got the impression that his captors didn't know what to do with his people. Only Dana Zumross was still interrogated regularly and perversely, she seemed to enjoy the process; Dana sometimes disappeared for days at a time as the locals consulted with her on her

favorite topics of discussion.

Speaking of Dana, a familiar van pulled up to the prison compound's front gate. It was dark out and most everyone else had gone to sleep, but the bright lights surrounding the compound illuminated everything quite nicely. So Hale was the only prisoner to see her get out of the van. His eyebrows rose in surprise as he saw that she was carrying a large and heavy backpack. Up until now, none of the prisoners had been allowed to get their hands on anything that could conceivably be used as a weapon.

Watching, Hale observed Dana exchange a few friendly words with her escort. In fact, it almost looked like that she was flirting with some of them, but that couldn't be right. In the entire time he had known her, Dana had always preferred tinkering with her machines to human interaction.

"Been having fun?" Hale asked after Dana was ushered inside the fence line. She still had that backpack.

"Actually, yes," Dana replied stiffly. Ah, there was the Dana that Hale had always known. "It's kind of nice to actually talk to people who can challenge you intellectually without worrying about being killed or worse," she added wistfully as she opened the door to her own room. There were actually more rooms than there were prisoners, so everyone had the luxury of having a private room despite there being four bunks to a room. Obviously, the locals anticipated catching more unwary pirates.

Once inside her room, Dana hit the lightswitch and began dumping the contents of her pack on an unused bunk. The contents seemed to consist entirely of books and writing pads. And there was one slab of plastic and chrome that had TOUGHBOOK etched onto it; Hale idly wondered what the point of sheathing a book in armor was.

"What is all this stuff?" Hale asked, picking up a random item. It looked like a math textbook.

"Homework," Dana replied simply.

"Homework?" Hale said. "What, they're making you tell them stuff on your off time now?"

"They're not *making* me tell them anything," Dana told him irritably. "I've pretty much reached the limits of what I can tell them as far as mechs go, but they still want to know more. 'How does the armor spread the thermal pulse from a laser evenly?' 'What are the mathematical formulae for H-H fusion reactions?' 'How do you make high temperature superconductors?' Captain, do you have any idea how embarrassing it is to be asked these kinds of questions and not be able to do more than look helpless in reply? Me! The so called 'technical expert' of our little crew!"

"Um, I never really thought about it," Hale admitted. "But why the books?"

"Self improvement," Dana replied, taking the math book from Hale's hand. "There's a lot of stuff I don't know about the very own technology I grew up with, but I'll be damned if I don't fill those holes."

"And they let you have all this stuff?" Hale asked, waving his hand over the pile of books.

"Yep." She grinned at him. "If I can get my technical knowledge up to par, I think I can make myself useful to the locals, get a high paying job with them, and move out of this dump. Now shoo! I have some studying to do!"

Hale found himself unceremoniously pushed out into the brightly lit night. Normally, such brusqueness would have really annoyed him, but his thoughts were troubled. Dana's words kept running through his mind. "Make myself useful," she had said.

"I wonder," Hale mused to himself as he walked over to his own room. "I wonder if these guys could use a good cadre to show them the ropes."

Hale was no longer bored.

Port Krin
Antallos
The Periphery
27 July 3020

"So there I was," Captain Mamoto was saying to the small crowd in the bar as he took a sip in the bar. "My poor *Drakon* was on the ground getting shelled by a neobarb wet navy battleship the size of an Invader, no, a Star Lord class Jumpship! But I held my ground! I waited hours under a rain of high explosive shells while my guns fended off the hordes of infantry trying to board by ship, hoping against hope that all our people would make it back aboard. But alas, it was not to be. One by one, the neobarbs swarmed Hale's mechs with primitive aircraft and raining down bombs. I waited until the last of Hale's mechs died and with regret decided there was nothing left that I could do. So I lifted off while under fire."

"But how could there be so many militia in one place?" a skeptical listener asked.

"Ah, there's the rub," Mamoto said dramatically. "That was a rich, rich world we landed on. You all saw the loot right?" There were grudging nods all around. "It turns out that we landed right in the middle of one of their major military bases. That idiot Hale picked the absolute worst place to land..."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Jane Dietrich whispered to her drinking partner. They were on the other side of the bar from Mamoto. "But wasn't it *Captain Mamoto* who picked our landing site?"

"Yep," Irdon Koltan replied, completely unconcerned as he sipped his own beer.

"Maybe we should refresh his memory?" Jane wondered. "Publicly."

"Nah, don't bother," Koltan told her. "Mamoto's a Dropship captain. You're just a lowly crewmember. I'm an even lowlier PBI."

"That's not fair," Jane said, frowning.

"Welcome to life as a pirate," Koltan told her cynically. "Not that the Inner Sphere's much better. Let's talk about something more pleasant. How's the loot selling?"

"Pretty good actually," Jane replied. "I can't believe how fast they're selling, especially the computers. Hell, it's not like they're compatible with any and all standard equipment." She frowned again. "Now that I think about it, I can't recall Mamoto mentioning that last part."

"But you still spend a lot of time on your own machine for some reason," Koltan said knowingly. "I never realized solitaire was so entertaining."

"Hey, I'm not just playing Solitaire on my shiny new computer, you know," Jane told him. She looked back at Mamoto. "Even so, I can't believe the price some people are paying for the things. However useless the skipper is on the bridge, he's one hell of a salesman."

"Ah, I knew there was a reason I let you convince me to not kill him."

* * *

Precentor Hadrian Long, Comstar's representative on Antallos, examined the strange... device. His trained eye noted that the lid consisted almost entirely of a flat screen monitor, the main body that appeared to be mostly keyboard, and the numerous ports of unconventional design. The monitor displayed a pastoral background with some icons lined up on the side. He turned to the subordinate who had brought it to him.

"It's primitive," he said to Demi-Precentor Alan Short. "I don't see what the problem is."

"The problem is that there is nothing in our records like it," Short replied patiently. "No one in the Inner Sphere produces anything like it. No one in the Periphery should be able to produce anything like it. And the coding is nothing like that used by the Star League; it's almost alien to the point of being indecipherable. So we can rule it

out as being 'lostech'. Somewhere out there is a planet that has the resources and industrial base to create an entire computer system entirely from scratch."

"Oh, Short, don't be absurd," Long snorted skeptically. "The most likely explanation is that some early pre-Star League colony went further out than most others. The Explorer Corps have found such worlds before and none of them are exactly paragons of the kind of advancement that you seem to be implying. This world is probably just another one like it. What's its name again?"

"The pirates are starting to call it 'Motherlode' because it looks so rich," Short answered. "But that's not my point. This isn't some ancient relic like what most people use. This is quite obviously newly made."

"So? There are still factories in the Inner Sphere that produce mechs," Long explained. "That doesn't mean that these people understand how it works or can make new ones."

"But, sir, we should still investigate it," Short said, almost pleading. "Our mission is the preservation of technology after all, and you know the pirates are going to do to a world even half as wealthy as what rumor says. They'll smash everything and another light of civilization will be lost to the darkness ignorance and barbarity."

"Yes, yes, write up a report for the home office," Long said dismissively. "I'll make sure to include it in the next month's status report. But you're being unduly impulsive Demi-Precentor. Even if these 'Motherloders' are the paragons of advancement you say they are, it means nothing. I have little doubt that the pirates here will eliminate them before we would be able to investigate. Worlds as wealthy as the one you described would draw them like flies."

"But, sir..."

"I'm sorry, Short," Long said, not sounding very sorry at all, "but that's the way it is. Our Blessed Order's mission may be to preserve technology, but we certainly don't have the ability to save every little lost colony out here, especially when we don't know where they are!"

* * *

"Lovely," said Controller Aden Vorax, ruler of the city-state of Port Krin. The sleek and glossy black ground car may not have been the most advanced machine ever made, but it most certainly had been made with loving care and an eye for aesthetics. "Thank you for the gift, Captain Benson."

"Not a problem, Mister Vorax," the Jumpship captain replied as he fondled a pretty slave girl serving him a drink.

"And you say there is a whole planet that can make treasures like this?" Vorax asked, glancing at the absurdly small "computer" on a nearby end table. Currently, its screen was displaying some 2D entertainment video. On display at the moment was an attractive woman in black shooting at the floor around her with a gun in each hand. As he watched, the floor gave way and the woman dropped through the improvised hole.

"Oh yeah. You have to see it to believe it." Benson said smugly, drawing Vorax's attention away from the machine. "And as it so happens, I'm the only one who knows where it is."

"Indeed?" Vorax replied, raising an eyebrow in interest. "That could be very... profitable."

"I certainly thought so," Benson said. "I imagine you could make a lot of money selling it to other captains."

"Please, Captain, that is so gauche," Vorax said with a knowing smile. "There are other ways that can make even more money."

**High Energy Physics Laboratory
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Boston, Massachusetts, United States of America
Earth
28 July 2005**

Dr. James Callahan smiled as he pulled on his safety goggles. Today's tests had brought the good doctor and his colleague out of the depths of the into what was normally hostile territory into the depths of the MIT High Energy Lab. That wasn't to say they were enemies, but there was a friendly rivalry going over their attempts to duplicate the exotic armor composite that was being unoriginal classified as "Inner Sphere Standard". Material Engineering would bust their asses in order to try and replicate the armor and their friends in High Energy Physics would create the most creative and abusive torture tests they could come up with in order to test it.

Slowly he say down at the desk and silently looked at the plate of dull metal that was being moved into position. Across the room one of his friends sat at the controls of one of the most powerful solid state lasers ever built on Earth. Originally part of the now canceled SDI program, the large weapon was easily capable of shooting a satellite out of orbit and was far weaker than the "Medium Lasers" taken from the damaged BattleMechs but on the reduced scale of this test would be comparable to the Inner Sphere weapons for test purposes.

"Test fire in three... two... one."

Dr. Callahan winced slightly as a loud crack sounded through the room and a bright streak of light traces its way across the room. Blinking to clear his eyes he could only smile when he saw the end result. The armor was deformed and its integrity was obviously compromised but for the first time it actually held.

Turning to Dr. Amanda Li, his counterpart in the battery of tests he could but smile. "What percentage was this battery of tests set to?"

By percentage he meant their current yard stick of progress: the

energy needed to breach the equivalent in IS Standard armor.

"Fifty," she replied with a large smile. "Fifty percent."

He couldn't help but laugh. "Fifty. We're at at least half effectiveness." To most that would seem like not much of an accomplishment but that inconspicuous plate of material hanging on the back wall was the best attempt they'd made so far, and depending on the rest of the tests it could prove to be the most advanced armor composit ever created on Earth.

He couldn't help but smile. They'd keep testing to see its limits, but this might just be the stop-gap measure that everyone was clamoring for.

BAE Systems
Farnborough Aerospace Centre, UK
July 29th, 2005

"Look at this," Dr Jeremiah Smith said, "See here and here?"

On the screen were a few microscope pictures of the latest experiments to reproduce the composite ceramic layer of BT armor.

"Mmmh. Yes, finally some samples survived the sintering.", Kevin MacMillian, Ph.D., agreed, "You have already started on assessing our new composite?"

"Yes. First tests show it is about equivalent with the original in thermal behavior and in the particle bombardment trials we saw statistically significant less degradation. The bad news? As expected, it is not as resilient against mechanical stresses. We need those long nanotubes."

"You have read the same publications i have. There are some promising experimental results, but nothing ready for mass production. But with the money we throw at it, there ought to be results soonish. Till then we will make do as best we can."

Troop Barracks
National Training Center
Fort Irwin, California
Earth
22 July 2005

It is a truism in military life that you tend to run into the same people again and again. It is also a truism that you will run into people you really don't want to be anywhere near where you end up, and that often these are the same people that you just can't seem to avoid running into again and again. Even allowing for these acknowledged universal truths, which had been experienced multiple times by all parties formed up in the parking lot, the current situation was still clear evidence of a higher being. A malicious bastard of a higher being possessed of a horrible sense of humor, but a higher being nonetheless.

Burgess Hale, former AFFS Captain, and dispossessed Mechwarrior was wondering if this had really been such a good idea after all. Most of the faces were unfamiliar to him, but eleven stood out as being people he'd seen before. Ten of them had affected postures of studied neutrality, but the bastard who'd bluffed him out of his mech seemed to be bouncing between outright hatred, pure disgust, and unholy glee entirely at random. *What the hell, the two guys I hit who are missing limbs don't look as pissed to see me as he is.*

Captain Lewis stepped up to address the formation "All right, you may have noticed we have a new addition to our unit. Mr. Hale, formerly of the good ship *Drakon*, formerly of the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns, is going to be assisting us with evolving a tactical doctrine both for using and destroying Battlemechs. Since he's new, I thought we'd welcome him to our august company with a little fun run." Captain Lewis's grin widened at the small exclamations of pain and dread that some members of the unit were unable to fully suppress.

As Hale followed along with the warming up exercises, he noted that he and the maniac seemed to be the only two in normal exercise clothes, while everyone else was in some variation of full combat

attire(although he was the only one present with a tracking bracelet locked around his ankle). His study was interrupted by the maniac passing him a water bottle and some pills saying "Unless you run marathons for fun, you're going to want to take those now."

"Excuse me?"

"The Captain there likes to see if he really can run people to death. Even if they were poison, you'd thank me for killing you quickly. For that matter, since you're here, is there any way I can get your old cell just to be away from this?"

More than two hours later, Burgess Hale decided that he really would have preferred the poison. He wasn't sure how large this facility was, but it certainly felt like they must have run around the whole thing twice. The most humiliating bit had to have been when they let the guy in the wheelchair set the pace on the roadway, although at least he'd only been the first of many to fall out during that stretch. After the *third time* coming back past the damned barracks, they finally slowed to a walk.

After they'd cooled down and been released for personal hygiene and breakfast, the maniac extended his hand, and said "Staff Sergeant Tony Dansel, I'm sure you recognize me from our last meeting. Just to make things super sunshine happy for both of us, I'm the guy you're probably going to be expected to train to use your old mech. Do me a favor, if you're going to rig it to kill me, make sure it's before the next of these human rights violations."

cough "Only"*cough* "if you take me with you. And here I'd thought I wasn't going to be tortured" *I don't think I've had my ass kicked this much even at Kilbourne.*

"Yeah, about that. You see those unit patches on the caps of our other old buddies? Well, if you see the same patch with the insignia in blue instead of gold and we've somehow left you alone, you're gonna want to run. They kind of have a grudge from your landing, and I really haven't been helping to make them happier lately."

Defense Agency Headquarters
Tokyo, Japan
Earth
1st August 2005

General Aida Tanaka glanced over the men in the briefing room for a few moments and then towards the large screen that took up most of the far wall.

The Alien Attack on New Zealand back in May had really shaken the entire world. Japan was perhaps shaken more than the rest of the world. Especially considering that the attack was performed by the wet dreams of just about every engineer and half the Japanese male population, large somewhat humanoid robots. In short mecha or Battlmechs as they were called everywhere else in the world.

That those Battlmechs came from a game that was heavily influenced by the Japanese Mecha genre such as Gundam or Macross was even more of a shock. The fact that the entire space around Earth had somehow been transported into another universe, something that was commonly called ISOT event by now, was only a minor shock against that.

Tanaka didn't want to think of it, but he had never seen the Japanese public being so active about something that was pretty much war. It was disturbing to say at least, especially considering the so called Second Pacific War a few years back.

Thankfully the Government had managed to get back to good relations with the US, but Tanaka had never been able to shake the feeling that a few of the politicians had closed their eyes when it had happened.

He sighed. But that was the past and 'simple' problems with the 'neighbors' tended to fade away from the public eye and memory when something bigger came knocking in your door.

Which brought him into this briefing room.

A number of people from Honda, Mitsubishi, Sony and other Japanese companies had come to show off a few projects. They hoped would get them money from the now bigger pot that was the National Defense Budget.

Looking through the numerous treaties that held Japanese down to self defense even more than before, but thankfully the politicians had found nothing that would keep them from increasing the budget when it came to Alien Threats.

A Honda manager walked up to the podium and bowed lightly before starting his presentation with a video.

The video showed what at the first glance looked like a real life mockup from a Manga, not unlike the full size model of the Gundam that had been build some time ago. Than the mockup began to move. The movements were a little sluggish, but as the man inside the mockup picked up a large crate that had to weight at least two hundred kilograms like it was nothing and than carried it around, Tanaka had a feeling that he knew why.

"This is the first Prototype of a suit of Powered Armor," the manager said." We developed it together with Tsukuba University. We hope to be able to develop it into a fully functional production model in a few months."

Tanaka noted that the man had said 'few months'. That could be any thing between two and twenty, very interesting. On the video, the man in the suit put down the crate, only to have him fall over backwards and flail around like a turtle that was turned on the back of its shell.

"As you see there a more than a few problems with the suit at the moment, but we are sure that we can get them out of the design."

"That armor," one of the other Generals asked." What is it? Some sort of Kevlar Composite? Aluminum?"

The man at the presentation table hesitated a little.

"Actually," he noted, "It's not armor at all. At the moment its only a plastic shell filled with styrofoam and lead to simulate the weight of actual armor. And it is currently missing anything aside from the exoskeleton needed to move it."

Tanaka chuckled lightly. It would probably mean that it was closer to twenty month until the first production level prototype was ready.

"I can't shake the feeling that the suit looks familiar," One of the Admiral at the table noted and again the Honda man hesitated.

"Ahm... We had Masamune Shirow create the design for the suit."

Tanaka glanced at the man and than noted that he was far from being the only one to snicker at that.

The man from Honda was questioned for a few more minutes before he was dismissed. One thing was for sure, if they put more money into it and got them to work with other companies, the suit might be a very useful design.

After the Honda man stepped down the man from Mitsubishi stepped up to the presentation table and likewise started his presentation with a video.

This time it showed something that was very close to being a mecha. Only it seemed to be a little smaller than the 'Mechs that had attacked New Zealand. But it still looked more like the lovechild of an industry robot and the Asimo, only with everything being exposed and very visible hydraulics. Next to it a man hung in the air, clad inside a virtual reality suit.

"This is the prototype of what we hope can some day become Japans first Mechs," the Mitsubishi man noted with a smile. "Internally we are calling the design 'Patlabor'. According to the 'sourcebooks' they would be called 'Proto-mechs'."

Tanaka shook his head and the General next to him muttered something about Otaku.

The man in the video began to make a few movements, the larger robotic frame following them with a light lag and rather jerky movements,

"The hydraulics are currently only a stopgap measure until these 'Myomer fibers' are available for construction."

The video ended with the robot somehow tripping and crashing into the steel cables that held it upright, making Tanaka shake his head again.

"Another project is trying to create an armor equivalent to the armor that was provided to us by the New Zealand government."

The video switched, showing a plate of one meter times one meter standing in the open of a testing ground. A Type 90 Main Battle Tank was placed on the other end of the range and fired. The plate was hit and flew through the air, falling to the ground nearly undamaged, only slightly cracked.

"This is the closest we have been able to get to it at the moment. We have substituted the nanofibers in the material with normal and more easily created Fullerenes, but we still have only managed to get the armor to be much less effective compared to the original armor. We think that we might need to increase the number of layers. Likewise we have yet to test its resistance against lasers."

Now that was interesting. He had read the tests of the pieces they had from the New Zealanders and it looked like they could make their Type 90 at least able to make one or two shots from those 'Mechs before being destroyed.

"However, the process to create this armor can still only be done in a laboratory. We need at least a year to perfect the process and make it into a fully industrialized process."

Tanaka nodded. The three projects sounded very interesting. Now it was time for the more outlandish projects that wanted money. Honestly, it was not like they could get the Yamato back up from the ground of the sea and turn it into a spaceship, as much as everyone in

the room wished it was possible...

August 1, 2005
Pentagon, Washington D.C.
Earth

Admiral McClusky sat down with SecDef trying NOT to check his aide as he lined up this presentation. He wasn't normally this nervous but given the fact that no one knew if any of the current services would survive in a recognizable form meant that reports like his got much higher scrutiny. "So Admiral, what can the Navy do if the next raid brings air support?"

McClusky started up his power point presentation. "Sir, if they show up this afternoon, not a damn thing. Not us, not the Air Force, not the Marines."

That got the Secretary's attention. "I know their armor is tough, but it's not that tough. The Kiwis downed one with Mavericks."

The Admiral nodded, and pulled up his first slide, showing an AIM-120 AMRAAM, and an AGM-65F. "The problem sir, is one of how we build our aircraft and missiles, vs. how everyone else out there armors up. Anything with the right warhead to degrade standard Inner Sphere plate is built into a missile meant for ground attack. Missiles built to actually knock down other aircraft use what is called a continuous rod warhead, think of it as aircraft scale birdshot. It gives a good lethality range from the missile, so it only has to get close, but against future threats it simply spreads the damage too wide to achieve measurable degradation. Frankly against any possible aerospace threat it's like firing buckshot at a battleship. At this point sir, the best current anti-aircraft missiles can hope for it to be ingested into an intake to cause a FOD, or otherwise lucky hits."

The Secretary leaned back in his chair. "I've been SecDef long enough to know this isn't all you brought today. Let's hear your solution."

McClusky gave a wintery smile "My preferred solution would be Navy fusion aerospace fighters sortieing up to shoot down the incoming Dropships Sir. Absent that, the Navy does have two missiles in it's inventory that can be modified to meet the current threat. Both the

SM-2 Standard family of SAMs, along with the Phoenix Air to Air missiles have warhead payloads large enough to be a threat to aerospace fighter armor, even if they are half the size of the Foxtrot Mavericks the Kiwis used. This will require new warheads and reprogrammed seekers for contact detonation however. Close isn't good enough for that kind of armor. The upside is that a Tomcat can carry six Phoenixes each, and a Burke can pack up to 90 Standards, 96 in the latest Flights, and a Tico can pack 122. All can ripple fire their missiles off rapidly, giving them both the warhead size and volume of fire to be a serious anti-aerospace threat."

The SecDef nodded, also hearing the subtext. If the Navy came out looking good in the first air to air battle with the pirates, particularly if the Airforce lacked a viable countermeasure of it's own that would give the Navy a leg up on claiming a space combat mandate from Congress. However that was for the future. "This plan would require keeping the F-14s in service till space interceptors came into service. They are already getting long in the teeth Admiral. Can the Hornets or Super Hornets take up some of the slack?"

The Admiral pulled up another slide, show a comparison of the three aircraft. "I'm afraid not sir. Not only is the Tomcat the only aircraft designed to employ the Phoenix, both aircraft are too small to carry a useful sized salvo even if we did do the integration work. At least if we are limited to conventional missile warheads."

The Secretary of Defense felt a slight chill at those mild words. While not the attitude of the Fifties, the halls of the Pentagon have been much more willing to consider 'special devices' options in planning for the United States, and Earth's, defense against the scum of the stars. Or even an actual star nation. While a big enough warhead could breach Spheroid armor as the Admiral pointed out there was a big gap between most regular weapons, and the minority of Earth weapons with large enough of a sting to be noticed. "They could be made nuclear capable?"

Admiral McClusky nodded. "Both are Cold War systems sir, the nuclear option, or at least a nuclear capable variant, was part of the design process for both the Phoenix and the Standard. Some of my people are even proposing putting nuclear warheads on the SM-3,

that is the ABM variant of the Standard sir. It can hit targets in orbit, just. Though they'd be more effective if we timed their intercept to catch the inbounds when they have committed to atmospheric entry.

SecDef looked out of the window for a minute. "The National Command Authority is restricting nuclear weapons to exo-atmospheric use Admiral." The "For Now" was left unsaid. Both felt it was possible if things went bad enough nukes would be used on the ground, and hang the consequences. "I will bring your plan for the SM-3 to the President's attention as a supplement to the space based defenses. Though ROE would likely keep them detonating above the atmosphere. "

Admiral McClusky nodded. "If we are talking conventional warheads then Sir for in atmosphere battles then I'm afraid we will just have to eat the cost of keeping the Tomcats flying. The Navy is proposing restoring the fifth fighter squadron back to all Carrier Air Wings. So we are looking at two Tomcat Squadrons for Aerospace defense and three of Bugs and Superbugs tasked to ground attack."

The SecDef nodded, "I assume the written report has the budget numbers?" At the Admiral's nod he picked it up. "Very well, the work on the Standards I can be sure of getting through, keeping the Tomcat in the air will require more work, though unless the Air Force comes up with something comparable I'm believe you will get at least some funds authorized for that too."

**Home of Thomas Schmidt, Dipl. Ing.
Freiburg, Germany
August 2nd, 2005**

Thomas Schmidt woke nearly vibrating with anticipation a good hour before his alarm. "They will arrive today. I can feel it."

While it was generally easy to get samples of battlemech parts or at least access to the relevant work groups, getting some of the infantry equipment proved more difficult. The Kiwis had founded the Reclaim Consortium to exploit the captured items. Late June they published a list, asked for proposals and promised funding for accepted projects.

The Fraunhofer Institute for High-Speed Dynamics, Thomas's workplace for seven years, joined the bidding. It felt like it was just yesterday.

**Fraunhofer Institute for High-Speed Dynamics
Ernst-Mach-Institut
Meeting room
Freiburg, Germany
July 4th, 2005**

"Did you read the Reclaim announcement?", Thomas asked during the weekly group meeting. "Are we going to propose a project of our own?"

"Are you secretly a Battletech player? We already cooperate on the Armor Project with some of the other Fraunhofer facilities. You can transfer to that lab if you prefer, but we'd be sorry to lose you." Fechtel replied.

"No i am not secretly a player. But i have read the novels and after the ISOT i got the source books. And no, I am certainly not interested in the armor research. But the list contains three, and i quote, "powered knives of various design". According to my books the only powered knives in the Battletech universe are so called vibro-blades."

"Vibro-blades? That old SciFi idea?" Julia Becker made doubtful face. "You are sure that works? Vibrations strong enough to influence the cutting ability should peel the muscles of your bones. If you can at all manage to hold the knife in the first place."

"Yes, that old concept. And BT treats them as easy to hold as your bread knife, while cutting most materials like a "hot knife through butter"". Schmidt said making air quotes.

Fechtel listened to Thomas and Julia argue over the feasibility of vibro-blades. Ten minutes into their argument he came to a decision. "Lets finish this up. Julia, Thomas, the both of you will write a proposal to submit to the Reclaim Consortium. If we have enough free capacity, we give it a go."

Fraunhofer Institute for High-Speed Dynamics
Ernst-Mach-Institut
2. Floor Laboratory Space
Freiburg, Germany
August 2nd, 2005

Last week they got the approval and signed the paperwork. Since then they spent the time organizing their new little research group and holding theoretical discourses. Or as their colleagues said arguments and guesswork.

When Thomas finally arrived at their laboratory space a happy Julia Becker was already waiting for him.

"They arrived today." they said in unison. Julia gave him a look, but continued, "You'd think they had delivered ingots of gold. They came early in the morning with an escort in an armored car. That was a spectacle. The reception desk had to call Fechtel out of bed to sign for them."

"So we did get the two promised knives?" Thomas asked as they entered through the security door.

"Not exactly. We got two knives, but only one power pack between

them. Martin is on it, but i guess someone else had a proposal specifically for them."

"Well, at least someone had brains and left us one power pack. Now lets start this." Thomas and Julia moved to the station with their new used vibro-blades and started the examination.

"The Box"
National Training Center
Fort Irwin, California
Earth
4 August 2005

It felt good to be in control of his Mech again, Hale thought as Quasimodo crested a small ridge. Technically, Quasimodo – it felt funny to be driving a mech with such a personal name – wasn't really Hale's anymore. But the Hunchback had been in his ride since he had inherited it from his uncle.

Outside, the desert was a rolling plain that was mostly flat with just enough rises and dips to make things "interesting". Buildings dotted the terrain at random, fakes constructed to provide for more realistic training scenarios. The day was hotter than Hale would have liked for Mech operations what with heat being every Mech's enemy; but since Quasimodo's lasers had been powered down to training levels (which Hale couldn't override) and the autocannon loaded with blank ammo, he wasn't too worried.

"The general idea of this test," Zumross had told him before he climbed into the cockpit, "is to see how good BT sensors are against the systems that these guys can make. The rules are to follow the nav points and to try and shoot anything before they shoot you. The idea is to see if they can sneak up on you and get their shot off before you kill them. Any questions?"

"What's 'BT'?" Hale had asked.

"I dunno exactly," Zumross had told him with a shrug. "Some acronym that refers to any offworld made technology. But no one's telling me what the letters actually stand for."

"So how come you're not the one doing the driving?"

"Oh, because you're a better pilot than I am," Zumross had explained. "That means that these guys can get a better idea of what Mechs are really capable of. And besides," she had grinned mischievously as she

added, "I already did this test. It was... interesting."

Quasimodo's computer bleeped, bringing Hale back to the present. The impersonal feminine voice its computer told him that he had reached the first nav point. As he brought Quasimodo to a halt, Hale thought over Zumross's use of the word "interesting". He was certain that there was more to this test than what Zumross and Captain Lewis had told him. This couldn't be some over-elaborate hazing ceremony, could it?

"Control, this is Quasimodo," Hale said, keying the radio. "I'm at Nav Point Alpha."

A couple of the locals' planes roared by over head, moving lower and slower than anything Hale had ever seen short of actual VTOL craft. According to Zumross, they were some sort of specialist ground attack fighter, carrying light autocannon in the nose and enough bombs to turn his Hunchback into a smoking hole in the ground. They were there to keep an eye on him and make sure that he didn't try to run away with the Mech.

"Roger that, Quasimodo," a familiar voice came back. "Everyone's in position. Start your run any time you're ready."

"Dansel, that you?" Hale asked.

"Yep, that's me."

"I'm supposed to teach you to be a Mechwarrior," Hale said. "You should be here in the jump seat so you can watch me work."

"Well, I would be there, but the jump seat's really cramped," Dansel said. "The eggheads think my being there might screw with your reaction time. Besides, I can watch you just fine. Or didn't you notice all the cameras and monitoring equipment in the cockpit with you?"

Hale cranked his head around to look behind his seat at the nightmarish maze of wires and plastic boxes that were duct-taped, screwed down, or otherwise secured in seemingly random locations. So that was what they were all for, he thought.

"Right then," Hale muttered. "Okay, I'm starting my run. Quasimodo out."

Quasimodo had barely taken a step when a ground car that the locals called a Humvee burst out from behind a building half a klick ahead. A red blip immediately appeared on Hale's radar display. Reacting instantly, Hale speared the vehicle with both lasers. There was a puff of smoke and a light on the Humvee started blinking, indicating that the vehicle had been "killed". The soldier than had been operating what looked like a missile launcher of some kind saluted Hale as the Humvee sedately left the test area.

"Okay, that was easy," Hale said aloud, relaxing.

The side of another building more than a klick away flared as a fireball appeared in front of it. There was a bleep as his computer registered a "hit" on his Mech. Cursing, Hale activated the image intensifier and zoomed in on the building that had shot him. The view wasn't good, but it looked like there was a tank actually hidden inside the building.

"Ooh, looks like a point for the home team," Dansel said over the radio, his voice practically radiating smugness, "or should I say five points? Or is it three? Well whatever these geeks say the ammo does this week. C'mon, Hale, Zumross says you're supposed to be a good pilot. Make this a challenge for our guys at least."

"I intend to," Hale muttered as he switched his display from radar to infrared. While infrared detection had some obvious limitations in the middle of a hot desert, Quasimodo's sensors might be able to spot the heat from the exhaust of the internal combustion engines that seemed to be used in everything on this planet. In fact, there was a blip right over...

A tank rolled into view, a low wall obscuring everything but the turret. It had barely appeared when one of Hale's lasers struck it. The burst of smoke and blinking light was gratifying.

"Ouch, another point for the visiting team," Dansel said.

"C'mon, Dansel," Hale replied mockingly. "Make this a challenge!"

Three small blips appeared on Hale's display moving fast. They were also behind him. Without thinking, Hale ducked Quasimodo behind a nearby building, interposing it between himself and the contacts, although that required a little crouching. His computer beeped.

"Well crap," Dansel said disgustedly. "The referee computer's calling it a near miss."

Grinning, Hale didn't reply. Instead, he stood Quasimodo a little straighter, poking the head a bit above the top of the building to take a quick look and ducking back down before they could shoot at him. He spotted three VTOLs of the type that the locals called "Apaches". One of them was already peeling off, obviously having expended its load on the near miss; for some reason, the locals didn't seem to build anything with endurance in mind. The other two Apaches were spreading out, obviously hoping to flank him. Well, he couldn't have that.

Hale leaned Quasimodo over around the building's corner and fired its laser and autocannon. The Apache he shot at signaled its death before the pilot could reach. Hale didn't wait; he spun Quasimodo around just as the other Apache zoomed around the opposite corner, trying to take advantage of the other VTOL's "sacrifice". He fired everything at it and was rewarded with another kill. Hale's computer beeped.

"Argh," Dansel commented. "Only the chin gun fired. Computer's ruling no damage. Stupid machine."

Hale was chuckling and had started to reply when the computer beeped.

"Ooh, score another for the home team," Dansel chortled. He sighed. "It's a pity that Comanches don't carry more or heavier ordinance though."

Hale spotted the "Comanche" as it turned to leave. It was another

VTOL, one that bore a slight resemblance to a Ferret, but with small winglets for carrying ordnance. Only they weren't really winglets, Hale realized as he watched them fold into the Comanche's body. They were more like bomb bay doors. And it didn't show up on his display at all.

Studying his display closely, Hale saw that the Comanche did show up on it. But the contact was pretty weak, fluttering in and out of existence as the computer tried to determine whether it was really there or not. Hale switched to radar, but the results were little better.

"Control, Quasimodo. What the hell?" Hale said outraged. "Have you people been fooling with my sensors?"

"Sorta, but not in the way you think," Dandel replied gleefully. "We'll tell you all about it after the test. Control out."

Another Comanche appeared in the distance, popping above a ridge dead ahead. Hale immediately laid crosshairs on it and fired everything he had. The Comanche ducked back down behind the ridge without firing back, but also without signaling that it had been killed. Hale realized that it hadn't opened its bomb bay doors.

"Ooh, a complete miss," Dandel commented. "The computer says your lasers passed to either side of the chopper and the AC burst went low. I guess your mighty BT tech isn't very accurate if it can't, y'know, *see* what it's shooting at."

"What kind of test is this?" Hale demanded.

"You'll see," Dandel replied. "Heads up, Quasimodo. Next contestant's inbound."

Frantically, Hale began to cycle between Quasimodo's sensor modes, trying to spot the next machine coming at him. As he did, an alert he had never seen before popped up on his display. What the hell was a "TAG ALERT"?

Things went downhill from there.

Zumross met him after the test at the foot of Quasimodo.

"What the hell was that?" Hale demanded irately. The Comanches had been embarrassing enough. Then the planes had come it and started plinking at him from what should have been impossible distances, not even bothering to strafe or divebomb; the damage that their supposed hits would have inflicted had they been real had been lovingly described by Dansel. According to Dansel, Hale had been killed a dozen times over while trying to get Quasimodo's sensors to work properly. What was worse was the way the planes just refused to show up on any of his sensors until they had completed their attack runs; even then, they just flickered in and out of existence. The only time Hale ever got solid reads on them were when they passed directly overhead, but those moments were far too brief.

"You mean the stealth fighters, sir?" Zumross asked politely.

"You know I mean that, Zumross!" Hale replied angrily as they headed for the main building. Then something she had said clicked. "'Stealth' fighters? What does 'stealth' mean?"

"Well, in the context of military technology," Zumross began, "stealth is any technology that tries to fool sensors into not seeing what's there. In this case, it's fighters and VTOLs."

"I've never heard of such a thing," Hale objected.

"I have," Zumross admitted. "I've read stuff about Star League lostech that might do similar things, but I always dismissed that as just stories."

"Yeah, but that's *lostech*," Hale griped. "These guys are so primitive that can't even build decent armor. How the hell can they have lostech?"

"Because for them, it's not lost," Zumross told him soberly. "They invented it."

"Invented? How?"

"Because until we came, they had to invent and build everything they have," Zumross said quietly, looking around at busy base wistfully.

"Because they had to make everything from the ground up. Because they understand everything about their technology. Because unlike the Inner Sphere, their economy has never been smashed, their scientists never wantonly slaughtered, and technology has never backslid."

"Oh, c'mon," Hale scoffed. "They mush have done some backsliding. They lost space flight, didn't they?"

"They never had space flight," Zumross said, completely seriously.

"Never had..." Hale began. He stopped then shook his head. "If they never had spaceflight, how the hell did their ancestors get here? The original colonists had to get here somehow."

"Well, you see, Captain, they're not colonists," Zumross told him. "They're not colonists because this is the homeworld of humanity."

"But the homeworld of humanity is Terra," Hale pointed out. They were almost to the building now. He could see Dansel waiting right outside the front doors.

"Exactly," Zumross said. "This planet IS Terra, somehow transported through space and time from the early twenty-first century."

Hale gawked at the ludicrous statement. Before he could formulate anything to say, Dansel spoke.

"Yeah, welcome to Motherfuckin' Terra," he said to Hale. "The biggest damned bullseye in the Battletech universe."

Washington DC
United States of America
Earth
August 7, 2005

Jack Ryan's throat felt dry as he stepped up to the podium. He had a feeling that this speech would be the first thrown stone of an avalanche that would change the political face of the Earth forever. The problem is he was left with the nagging question, that while this would be good for the Earth would the end result be good for America? He had to wonder if he was betraying his country to save his world.

Still, he had to ask himself, would there even be an America left to betray if he didn't? He had to do this. Sometimes if you are afraid you just have to take a step forward, and as the so called 'Leader of the Free World', he had a responsibility to set an example.

"My fellow Americans, and citizens of the planet Earth," He began, "I am here speaking to you today in the name of international unity. On May 16, 2005 it became clear to all of us that we are not alone in the universe. This realization came not as we'd hoped for so long, in the form of peaceful visitation, but in a cowardly attack against a free nation. An attack against civilians with aims that amounted to nothing more than a grand act of petty theft that left hundreds dead and thousands wounded. It was only good fortune that there were military assets in place to repulse this assault."

"We thought that was it. That the arrival of pirates out of something fictional was some cosmic accident, a twisted act of divine comedy. If so, then the events of May 25th made it clear that the joke was on us. On that date the sky changed and with it we were stripped of our naivety. It was not the pirates who were displaced, but rather us."

"The Inner Sphere, the thousands of inhabited worlds that make up the majority of human civilization, are divided into five scavenger states ruled by feudal overlords whose greatest desire is domination of all mankind under the flag of an empire 250 years lost. As it is, Earth now stands as the last seat of democracy in a universe gone

mad. The last beacon of progress in a universe in decline."

"I make the following plea, not only to the leaders, but to the people of the world. We cannot be consumed by our petty differences any longer. We are a target, both to those who would envy our accomplishments and those who would see us a threat to their schemes. I make no reservations when I say that should our world become common knowledge then the best we could look forward to is slavery or death. This threat is real and I do not exaggerate. The pirate Dropship escaped with several cargo containers, one of which was loaded with consumer electronics, a prize that I am told will inevitably bring further attention. We now stand at the edge of a great precipice that threatens to consume us all."

"With this in mind I propose the formation of a pan-national defense agency dedicated to the protection of the Earth and her people from threats from without. A Global Defense Initiative formed of the militaries of our world ready to both defend our planet from external threats and to prosecute war against those who would threaten us. To this aim I have already asked that a Global Defense Bill be introduced both into the Congress of the United States of America as well as a resolution before both the General Assembly and Security Council of the United Nations."

"I now leave you with this. Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of this great nation, said on the eve of our War for Independence, 'We must all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately'."

"Good night and god bless you all."

As he stepped away, Jack couldn't help but think of the worlds of another, much older leader. One who once was forced to take as great a risk as Jack had done today.

Alea iacta est

The die is cast.

NATO Headquarters
Main Briefing Room
0900 Zulu 05 August 2005

The Turkish Army General and current C-in-C of NATO tapped his water glass with a well worn K-Bar knife that had served him well over his long and distinguished career.

"Gentlemen, come to order. I heartily welcome our friends from Australia, Finland, France, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Ukraine as observers. This emergency meeting has been called jointly by our senior and our most junior members. Will the United States or the Russian Federation be presenting?" asked the NATO C-in-C.

The Russian Air Force representative, Marshal Grigoryi Andreyavich Egorov stood "Mister Chairman, our respective governments have come to conclusion that only two missile capable of destroying pirate aerospace assets. Only two missile have warhead bigger than 45 kilogram and flight profile or envelope necessary. All other can only hope for very lucky hit to canopy or other Golden BB. Is R-33 and AIM-54. Both only be carried by biggest fighters Grumman F-14 Tomcat and Mikoyan 31 Snow Bear what you call Foxhound."

More than a few representatives stirred however none spoke as the Russian sat down and the American representative stood. Admiral James Monroe took over the presentation "Gentlemen, the United States has 157 F-14A+ and 53 F-14D currently in service and our Russian allies have 287 Mig-31M and 48 of the older Mig-31F. The Ukraine has an additional 33 Mig-31F in service. Frankly that's just barely enough assets to cover NATO leaving the rest of the world out in the cold. Unacceptable. We propose three plans running concurrently. First the United States Navy will beach all of our Tomcats and spread them around the world basing at military and civilian airports close to potential targets. The Russians will also spread their Snow Bears, only to military fields capable of supporting those overgrown beasts."

Egorov stood again, "Gentlemen, those of you not familiar with our Snow Bear, is even bigger than Sukhoi 27 what you call Flanker. Weigh fifty metric tons, almost same as modern battle tank, and is not including four 5,000 litre external fuel tanks and four 491 kilo R-33 missile. Is capable of MACH 2.35 sustained over 750 kilometer combat range allowing return to base at pedestrian pace. Burst speed 2.93 speed of sound, although at that speed missile cannot launch. Also Snow Bear and R-33 not Russian copies of F-14 and Phoenix. No. Snow Bear ultimate version of Foxbat interceptor AND greatest strike fighter ever built, F-105 Thunderchief. R-33 primarily designed to destroy incoming cruise missiles and American heavy bombers like B-52 and B-1. B-2 too stealthy for BVR, however there are plenty of other ways to kill it."

As the Russian returned to his seat, Admiral Monroe continued, "Because there are huge swaths of our globe, mostly in Africa, Asia, and South America that aren't viable targets for economic raiding those areas will be left to their indigenous defenses except as noted. We propose to base Tomcats in Southhampton and RAF Leuchars covering the UK and Eire. Marseille, Barcelona, Rome, in the western Med. Venice and Istanbul in the eastern Med. Co-located with German Navy Tornados near Bremershaven and the Dutch Air Force for Rotterdam. The faster Snow Bears at Helikon, Sigonella, Rota, and RAF Akrotiri which covers the Mediterranean basin. RAF Leuchars and Linköping will cover the North Sea with Linköping also capable of supporting north-central Europe and all of Scandinavia. Landivisiau and RAF Brize Norton will cover western Europe. Central European coverage will be based in as yet three undecided locations in Holland, Switzerland, and/or Germany. Eastern Europe will be covered from Poland. The US and Canada will have single Mig-31 squadrons at Goose Bay and Vancouver, in the north, New Orleans in the south, and Goose Creek South Carolina. Two squadrons will be based at Barksdale, Fallon, Dallas, and at Kennedy Space Center. Those at Kennedy will also cover the Caribbean and Bahamas. Tomcat squadrons will be at all of their current Naval Air Stations. That covers NATO. Marshal Egorov?"

The two man show continued as the American took his seat and a well needed and deserved sip from his water glass and the Russian spoke "Japan will be covered with Tomcats and Snow Bears from

Naval Air Facilities in said country. Macau, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore would receive single Tomcat squadrons with two Snow Bear squadrons in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Agreements need be made with all but Taiwan, but I suspect governments will be most amenable to free protection."

He received the laughs as expected when he wrote that part of what his new friend James called a 'Dog and Pony Show.' Another Americanism or witty witticism as they call them to remember.

He continued, "Australia will get two squadrons, one up north and one near Sydney supporting Tomcat squadron in Sydney. As China refused to accept NATO assistance after humiliating defeat few years ago, they idut na hui. South Africa will be covered from AFB Hoedspruit which also serves as emergency runway for Space Shuttle so it long enough for our Snow Bears, Tomcats will be located Port Elizabeth their largest port city. New Zealand lacks facilities long enough for our aircraft, and will thus have two Tomcat squadrons assigned Whenuapai and Ohakea. Iran indicated they would protect Persian Gulf with their Tomcats, however they cannot be trusted, three Snow Bear squadrons will be based in Oman alongside their Sepecat Jaguars and Tomcat squadron will be based in the UAE...."

The British Army General representing the UK interrupted, "I beg your pardon gentlemen, by my count that's quite a few more than the 45 squadrons you have aircraft for."

"Da, General. That is part two of our plan. Admiral?"

The Russian and American once again switched places. "Gentlemen, the US Navy has 348 F-14A that can be made airworthy again" he said before turning to the British General, "that's 29 squadrons. They'll all be equipped with the older block AWG-9 radar systems, but those can interface with the Phoenix Cs just not the Sealed Cs so those will only go to the squadrons operating the B and D models. The Russian Air Force has 137 fox models that could be made to fly again. All of the Tomcats pulled from the Boneyard will be close to their 7,350 hour limits, some will even exceed it. Prior to being absorbed, Grumman determined the titanium frame would last 7,500 hours, so we'll have enough flight time for at least the next eleven to

sixteen months. Beyond that, we'll lose most of those old and grey 'Cats and Bears. That's where part three comes in to play."

The Admiral sat down and the Russian stood to the grins of many of the senior officers present, including the presenters.

"Da. Part three has two components. First Mig-31BM and R-33 upgrade programs shelved in 1999 will be reopened. Engineers and technicians formerly employed by Grumman Aerospace will join aircraft portion of program. Engineers from Hughes and Raytheon will join the R-33 upgrade program in order to develop R-37 of which we expect to carry six on the Super Snow Bear. The second component involves engineers from those companies along with British Aerospace, MBDA, Saab, and Dassault who will be invited to join Novator K-100 program also shelved in 1999 for lack of funds. Was joint venture with India to produce missile with many features of R-37 only small enough to be carried by Mig-29 and Sukhoi 27. Missile body, engine and warhead are already ready for production. Difficulty is with guidance head so we think outside box. Put French Super 530 and AIM-120 seeker heads on missile. Then all Dassault products and all fourth and fifth generation aircraft may be able to use. Range will be limited to under 50 kilometers but is better than nothing, yes?"

Both the American and Russian aides began passing out briefing folders. Admiral Monroe spoke again, "Gentlemen, these include the plan specifics and the contributions and suggestions necessary by each party invited. We're pressed for time, so the time limit is 72 hours from tomorrow noon. We'll need binding resolutions from your governments and those firms that wish to join in the programs. Because the K-100 bodies are just plain milled aviation grade aluminum, the warheads are just a big 50 kig blob of high grade explosive, and the engine is a simple air breathing solid fuel rocket there's no reason why we can't begin building those bodies starting next month."

After several minutes of small talk between Army and Navy senior officers while their Air Force and Naval Aviation aides poured through the presentation folders, the French Air Force representative looked at his longtime colleague, a senior executive of Dassault

getting his nod to speak. "Our Mirage III, 2000, and Rafale can carry two weapons, however performance will be degraded to seriously degraded for the IIIs with that weight."

It was a rare individual that didn't note the French General using the possessive when referring to Dassault products, confirming the deep links between French industry and the senior officers of its military and government.

The representative of Saab responded, "Yes this is so with all of our aircraft, except the large and heavy fighters such as the Tornado, Eagle, and Typhoon. Even the heavy middle weight Hornet will have difficulty and only be able to deploy two. Basic guided missile theory assigns warhead weight to no more than one-tenth weapon weight. One cannot put a 50 kilo warhead in a 150 kilo missile."

The meeting ended soon afterwards, with officers and their aides moving quickly to their transports home, or to their nearby embassies in the case of the Australian, Japanese, Kiwi, and South African contingents.

Two days later after Jack Ryan's rousing speech everyone had signed on well within the time limit proposed. Beginning the third week in September missile bodies are fabricated by Dassault, Saab, BaE, Hughes, and Raytheon. The original manufacturer Vypel continues to manufacture K-100 engines and warheads to be mated with R-33 guidance packages built at another of their factories. Their body facilities under conversion to augment the production of solid fuel engines, although that wasn't expected to be completed before 1 March 2006.

Quasimodo's Hangar
Fort Irwin, California
Earth
18 August 2005

It's too damned early in the morning for this, Hale thought grumpily. The regular morning torture sessions that Captain Lewis laughingly called "physical training" had started off normally. And although Hale would never admit it, nearly a month of Lewis' tender mercies had left Hale in better shape than he could ever remember being. But this morning, the regular run was cut short when they arrived at the improvised mech hangar after a mere single lap around the base.

"What's going on here?" Hale blurted out upon spying Quasimodo.

Techs were swarming around the mech. The main autocannon housing was being disassembled. Hale could see Zumross supervising several techs as they detached the armor plating and hooked the freed edges up to a crane.

"Ah, welcome, welcome," a middle aged civilian said to the newly arrived soldiers. He waved at Quasimodo. "Isn't she a beaut?"

"Yes she is, Doctor Cray," Captain Lewis replied. "I brought my men here to see the modifications you're making."

"Modifications?" Hale yelped, outraged. These... these ancient primitives were messing around with modern technology? They were going to break something! Mechs were damn near irreplaceable, especially on *this* planet!

"Why don't you explain to them what your people are doing?" Lewis went on, ignoring Hale's near apoplexy.

"Certainly, and please, call me 'Phil'," the civilian said. "Gentlemen, allow me to present the first class twenty autocannon to ever be built on Earth."

With a flourish, 'Phil' pointed to what looked like a plumber's

nightmare maze of piping, tubes, and pistons mounted inside a boxy, steel frame. It took Hale a moment to spot the muzzles of gun barrels poking out of one end of the thing; they looked absurdly small compared to the rest of thing.

"That's an AC-20?" Dansel asked, his tone suggesting that he didn't quite believe it either.

"Technically," Phil began, "that is a GAU-8/A Avenger, a thirty millimeter Gatling gun much like the ones used by the A-10 Thunderbolt II. We've modified this one of course to increase the length of the burst that can be fired accurately from it while simultaneously creating shot groups tight enough to do worthwhile damage to standard BT armor."

"And how'd you do that, Doctor?" Lewis asked. His tone indicated a bit of theater, that he already knew and was only asking for the benefit of those like Hale who didn't know.

"The answer is two fold actually," Phil answered. "First, we wrapped nearly the entire length of the cannon in a liquid cooling jacket based on what we learned from BT 'heat sinks'. That was simply to prevent the barrels from melting from the heat generated by the sustained fire that we wanted from it. BT metallurgy is still superior to ours in that regard, I'm afraid.

"The second thing we did," Phil went on, "was build in a rather hefty recoil compensation system so that so that every shot doesn't throw the gun's aim off. This was developed from studying Quasimodo's own recoil compensators. All told, the resulting system would have been heavier than Quasimodo's gun, but we manage to save some weight by simplifying the ammo feed."

"Simplifying the ammo feed?" Dansel asked.

"A significant part of the weight of BT autocannons is that they can draw from multiple ammunition stores," Phil answered. "A laudable bit of redundancy, but it imposes a substantial mass penalty."

"So does it actually work?" Hale asked. He was a bit skeptical about

the whole thing.

"Actually, yes it does," Phil replied, "at least in laboratory tests. It took this long to work all the bugs out of it so that we can fire it reliably. Now we need to put it on a mobile platform for further testing."

"But why Quasimodo?" Hale persisted. "Why not one of your tanks?"

"Because it's too big and heavy," Phil sighed. "All the extra equipment we added means that there isn't a platform in the world that can use it. Well, a ship maybe, but certainly no land or air platform. It weighs about as much as Quasimodo's cannon, which means that this mech is the only platform in the world capable of carrying it."

"Hey, Phil," Zumross greeted cheerfully as she came up to the civilian and planted a kiss on his cheek.

No way, Hale thought. He had not just seen what he thought he saw. Who was this woman and what happened to the real Dana Zumross?

"Hello, Dana," Phil replied. "How goes the disassembly?"

"We're almost ready to remove the autocannon," Zumross replied. "I'll be going up in a few minutes to double check that all the connections have been properly released. What are you up to?"

"I was explaining to these gentlemen about the new autocannon," Phil told her.

"Cool," Zumross said. She turned to the soldiers. "Has he told you guys about how much better this new gun is?"

"Better?" Hale said incredulously. "He just told us how it was worse!"

"Well, I'll admit that it does have a few more moving parts and less redundancy," Zumross admitted. Then she grinned. "But I think the features more than make up for it."

"Features?" Hale asked, practically dreading the answer.

"It's got a variable rate of fire," Zumross explained, still grinning. "If you step down the rate of fire, the recoil compensators have less recoil to compensate for. That translates into more accurate fire at longer distances. In theory, this thing can mimic the performance of lighter autocannons with just the flip of a switch."

"One of things that puzzled BT players for years was the mysterious drop in effective range of BT autocannon as weight of shot increased," Phil explained. "That turned out to be because recoil was throwing off the aim of the autocannon, so there were limits to what could be fired accurately, even with heavier recoil compensation."

"So we have what?" Dansel said thoughtfully. "An AC-20 that can play at being an AC-10?"

"Or lighter," Zumross said. "There's this thing called an Ultra in the source books that describe a type of autocannon that increases rate of fire but also has an increased chance to jam. This autocannon actually does the opposite, sacrificing raw damage for greater range, but keeping the shorter ranged heavier punch for when it's needed."

"So this thing is four autocannons in one?" Dansel said admiringly. "That's really cool."

"Eight actually," Zumross corrected. "There's a second set of firing modes from the first. This one goes for a wider shot group than the first mode. It requires less work from the compensators, bumping up the effective range a bit, but it also spreads damage inflicted all over the place on the target with a good chance of some bullets just outright missing."

"What good is that?" Hale asked.

"Huh, it sounds like an LB-X autocannon," Dansel said thoughtfully. "Doubly cool."

"Maybe, maybe not," Phil said. "Without an actual LB-X autocannon to compare it against, there's some question as to whether we'd get a 'cluster' round effect against hard targets like mechs. In any case,

we're envisioning the second mode – we're calling it 'walking fire' by the way – would be more useful against soft targets like unarmored vehicles or infantry."

"Yeah, yeah, this sounds nice and all," Hale said doubtfully. "But the question is, will it really work?"

"Why do you think we're installing it in Quasimodo?" Zumross replied. "Give us a day to install it and reprogram Quasimodo's targeting system to handle the multiple firing mode and we'll find out."

D.A.R.P.A. Research Facility
United States, Earth.
August 24, 2005

Dr. Arthur Davis blinked in surprise as he read the proposal, he couldn't believe that somebody wanted to create a nuclear powered attack missile.

However as he read through the proposal he could see that it was nothing like the infamous Project Pluto.

The first major difference was that this missile would be powered by a BT fusion reactor, and its engine would be a simple fusion torch.

A second major difference was that the missile wasn't designed to operate in an atmosphere, instead it was designed as a spaced based antiship missile.

The biggest difference was the fact the missile wouldn't carry any nuclear warheads, instead it would deploy a ten ton kinetic interceptor which also housed the fusion reactor powering the missile. The fact that the reactor would go critical and detonate after the interceptor impacted its target at several hundred kilometers a second was, in his opinion, simply adding insult to injury.

After considering the proposal for a minute, he decided to send the proposal to the Future Programs Division with his recommendation that preliminary research and feasibility studies be undertaken. He also recommended that the project be moved to active research and development once the necessary technologies were developed.

And finally, as the proposal had been inspired by Project Pluto, he decided to name the project Erinyes.

BAE Systems
Farnborough Aerospace Centre, UK
Office Project Manager BattleTech Armor
August 24th, 2005

"Here", MacMillian says and lays a 20cm by 20cm matte grey plate on Cooper's desk, "our first home produced ablative armor in Battletech style."

"How well does it compare?", Fergus Cooper asks as he looks over the plate.

"A few less layers. We can't make the ceramic composite as thin. When we try either the Carbon nanotubes degrade in the sintering or the CBN powder doesn't fuse properly. Overall we have about 2/3 the strength on the same weight, a little worse with projectiles. Maybe a little better with those PPC, but that's not something we should rely on till we get one and can test it."

"That is not as good as we hoped but better than we feared. How fast can we produce this?", Cooper asks while holding up the first sample.

"We estimate the output of our experimental production facility at 3 to 7 tons a month. Give us two months to streamline and you will have a design for a 100plus tons a month facility on your desk."

"Add in a year to build the factory and get over the teething problems. We could be the first with a ready for the market ablative armor." Cooper muses.

**Meeting Room
Fort Irwin
California, Earth
30 July 2005**

"Right, next on the list, the techies think they can cobble the Commando back to working order using bits from the other two. Do we have any thoughts on who should be put in the cockpit?" Newly promoted Major Lewis asked, as he looked over the table.

"Jankowski." Dansel replied without hesitation.

Lewis felt his eyebrows involuntarily rise. "Reasoning?"

"Of our current prisoners, he remains the most underutilized. He lacks the technical expertise to be able to defeat any safeguards we may put in place unlike Zumross, and unlike Hale doesn't have the personal connections and experience to manage an on-the spot defection under the nose of a watchdog in the event of another attack. As the pilot with the least experience, he has the least to unlearn when it comes to adjusting to our doctrine and capabilities. Since the Stinger wasn't his personal mech, he will lack any personal animosity towards us, if, especially if we put him in the cockpit of a larger more capable machine. Finally, his piloting abilities and reflexes are simply unreal for a rookie."

"What do you mean? You took him down easily enough." Hale interjected, he'd wanted to object to more, but the core of integrity he was slowly rediscovering couldn't deny the basic truth of the rest.

"The techies finally got a half-way decent simulator running, and one of the first things they programmed was the trap we laid for him. It took three separate mech trippers to bring him down, and despite suffering severe damage to five separate actuators, he'd regained his feet within moments, knowing what's happening and roughly when, I can keep my feet about a third of the time when I try it. He needs work on his judgment and tempering his shoot first reflex, but he's a damned sight better than anyone else we have that we can afford to put in the cockpit right now. Including me."

Dansel took deep breath as he wound down, looking up to see the door opening, and blanching as a small object rolled in. Shouting "Grenade!" he surged to his feet, heaving the conference table towards the door past the major, who barely managed to clear it as he reflexively dived for a corner. A moment later the flashbang went off, nearly deafening everyone in the room, followed by a muffled curse as someone ran face first into the now blocked door, and the sound of running from the hallway.

"Dansel, I'm beginning to think this feud is getting a little out of hand."

"Sir, with respect, it was your idea to hit their barracks in the first place. Although the rotting Kiwis we left in their storage unit as a gift for when they tracked it down might have been a little too much."

Band of the Damned Main Camp
Black's Hole
Periphery
25 August 3020

The Band of the Damned was a band of pirates that had haunted the "eastern" edge of the Inner Sphere for centuries. Not being historically minded, the Band's origins were largely forgotten by its members. A few members who had some interest in glory and "historical legitimacy" claimed that the Band had been founded by members of Kerensky's Army. Others thought the Band was even older than that, having tangled with and survived clashes with the SLDF during the Star League's hey day. A few skeptics and pessimists were of the opinion that the current Band was only the latest unit out of many to bear the name, the others forgotten in the dust bin of history.

Whatever the case, the Band of the Damned traditionally made its home on a worthless planet whose only value was its proximity to the richer worlds of the Draconis Combine and the Ourworld Alliance. Its name was constantly shifting, but was almost always known as the Hole along with the name of whoever was currently leading the Band. At the moment, the planet was called Black's Hole.

"So, ye came from Port Krin, did ye?" Colonel Niles Black, current leader of the Band, said to the intruder that his men had captured. He was an obvious offworlder with clothes in far too good a condition to be considered native to the Hole. The idiot had been found wandering around the wilderness near the Band's current camp. He was lucky that he wasn't just shot out of hand.

"Er, yes," the man said nervously, eyeing the pirates surrounding him. "I have a message from Controller Vorax for the leader of the Band of the Damned?"

"Oh, do ye, now?" Black laughed evilly. "And what would that pompous dandy want with the likes of us?"

"Uh, Controller Vorax has heard of a planet out in the Deep Periphery that is both very, very rich and ripe for the taking," the man from

Port Krin explained. "We've taken to calling it 'Motherlode'. But despite being so primitive as to lack battlemechs, Motherlode does have a militia large enough to be troublesome to anyone that tries to take over. Controller Vorax would like you to help him take over Motherlode..."

"WHAT?" Black roared, outraged. "Does Vorax think we be mercenary lap dogs to be summoned at his whim? We be the Band of the Damned! We go where we please, when we please, and KILL who we please!"

"No, no, no! It's not like that at all!" Vorax's man said quickly. "Controller Vorax is proposing a partnership! The plan is that you and several other mech units will work together to conquer Motherlode. Once that's done, the planet is more than rich enough to be divided up between everyone!"

"Oh, really?" Black said, eyeing the man from Krin dangerously. "What if I don't want to share? What's to stop me from beating Motherlode's coordinates out yer sorry ass and getting there first?"

"I don't know Motherlode's coordinates!" the man said desperately. "Really, I don't! Controller Vorax is keeping it a secret and will only give it out when everyone assembles at Port Krin!"

Black thought about that. Unfortunately, that made far too much sense. Vorax was a canny bastard if a bit too smart for his own good. The question was, was this Motherlode really worth his and the Band's trouble?

"Hrm... well ye've got my attention," Black said grudgingly. "Tell us more of this Motherlode place, Mister..." His voice trailed off questioningly.

"Buckley," the man from Port Krin said, relaxing. "Joseph Buckley."

The Split Axe
Port Krin, Antallos
Periphery
25 August 3020

"So, Colonel," Controller Vorax began, "how was your meal?"

"Quite good, actually, Mister Controller," Colonel Antoine Sanders replied. "Now to what do I owe the honor of such a scrumptious meal?"

"I am putting together a... how shall I put this... a coalition of independent mech units," Vorax began delicately.

"You mean pirates," Sanders said.

"Please, Colonel, I prefer the term 'independent operators'," Vorax chided. "But whatever we call them, there are a large number of them and I need someone to ride herd on them and keep them focused on what they're doing and away from each others' throats. Unlike most everyone else, you have heavy and assault mechs to back up your authority."

"So are you looking for a leader or a babysitter?" Sanders asked pointedly.

"Is there a difference?"

"No, I guess not," Sanders chuckled. "But I'm a mercenary, Mister Controller, not a pirate. I've been getting feelers from some Kurita outfit for a long term and well paying job. What can you offer to outbid them?"

"Ah, that brings us to the objective of this little exercise," Vorax said. "Out in the Periphery, there is a wealthy and relatively undefended world..."

"Wealthy and undefended?" Sanders interrupted skeptically. "No offense, Mister Controller, but in my experience, those two words are an oxymoron, especially out here in the Periphery!"

"Ah, but that's because no one knew it was there until recently," Vorax told the mercenary. "It was only recently discovered by chance. The Jumpship captain was one of my people and Motherlode's

coordinates are our secret." Vorax proceeded to describe the wealth of Motherlode to Sanders.

"Frankly, Mister Controller, that all sounds too fantastic to be real," Sanders said after Vorax had finished. "Wealthy and advanced enough to be worth taking but primitive enough to be a pushover? It's too good to be true."

"But..."

"However, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt," Sanders continued. "If you can show me actual proof that this place actually exists – the sensor records from Jumpship and Dropship should be good enough – then you've got yourself a force commander and the Dark Wing mercenary battalion."

Quest Industries
N.W. R&D Division
August 27 2005

Dr. Cassandra Sharpe walked briskly through the after-hours hallways of Quest Industries. She was walking briskly, because skipping was undignified.

She didn't even knock on the office door, she stepped in, a smile on her face.

J.T. Murphey was old school science. Brought onboard during the Cold War by Dr. Quest himself, J.T. had seen everything, or so everyone thought. The fallout from the pirate landing in New Zealand was still coming down.

He looked up from his paperwork and a cloud of stale cigar smoke, "Cass, tell me you got news."

Sharpe sat down, with a bit of an exhausted smile, "Yes J.T., I've got real news."

She looked at her notes, "The sample provided was very helpful. About 80% of our work is on the right track."

"And the remainder?" J.T. asked.

"That's the bad news, in several key areas, we were going the wrong way. We have identified the problems and begun to fix them." Sharpe brushed some hair out of her eyes as she finished.

J.T. sat there for a few moments, looking past the younger woman.

"How long?" he simply asked.

"I estimate 9-17 months before we can produce the high temperature super conductors on a small scale in the lab. Once we can do that, the pukes in Engineering can figure out how to make it on the larger scale." Sharpe was tired, proud and happy, but tired. Working 18

hours a day did that to you.

"So almost 2 years before we can start cranking this stuff out?" J.T. mused. "What would you need to speed things up?"

Sharpe thought for a moment, "I've got my whole staff in MatSci on this, anymore people would just crowd us. We could use more time on the Frame. The faster we can model this, the faster the government will get their new toys built."

"What ever you need, that just came down from the Board, Mr. Quest himself put a priority on it." J.T. looked at his exhausted worker, "Cass, send your team home, have everyone get some sleep. And that includes you, we start fresh tomorrow."

"Thanks J.T." Sharpe smiled tiredly at the older man. She stood and stretched, "See you later." She quietly shut the door on her way out.

J.T. sat there for sometime, his mind racing. He lit a fresh cigar and grabbed his phone. "J.T. here Mr. Quest, I've just spoke with Dr. Sharpe in Material Sciences."

J.T. listened for a moment, "9 to 17 months sir, she said the sample pointed them in the right direction."

He listened for few more moments, "Yes sir, I feel confident about her report. Yes, yes, thank you. I'll tell everyone, sir. And good night to you too."

J.T. sat there, staring at the reports concerning the pirate landing. 'If we get enough time to prepare,' he thought to himself 'the next time those sumbitches show up they are going to get a real surprise.'

O'Malley's Pool and Bar
Smalltown, Kansas
August 30th, 2005

It was a slow Tuesday evening. Tom Riley and Gregory McFudd, both just out of high school, were playing pool. Old Irvine, the town crank, was nursing a beer at the bar and O'Malley was polishing a glass.

It was Gregory's turn. Tom sat down and said, "My Dad badgered me again about starting in his garage. Mechanic is a safe job, he says. People will always need someone to fix up their truck, he says. And who will take over his shop, huh? But he spend his entire life here. If i start with him, i'll never get out."

"Why not join the Army? I've signed on, last week in Wichita." Gregory suggests as he takes his shoot.

"What? You are the only other halfway sane guy here!" Tom's surprised shout gets the attentions of the other two in the bar.

"Ever since i've seen the Mechs on TV i wanted to drive one of them. And the only way i can even come close to one, is joining the army." Gregory supplies.

That rouses Irvine, "Hah. You don't want to get too close to one of those. They are controlled with the brain, they said so on TV. They will crack open your head, pull out your brain and put it in a little tin box. It's all dark and empty. You don't feel anything till they slot you in. And YOU WILL do anything to stay in, mark my words. They did it to me in '87. Look here, here's still the scar." He rants and points to where they put the steel plate after a hammer bashed his skull in.

Both boys glance at each other and blink.

"Oh no. They are driven by an artificial intelligence, you see. They are part of Skynet. Fully automated ground combat craft send back in time." Gregory replies with a serious face. Tom suppresses a grin and

continues.

"Yeah, didn't you know? Skynet also send machines back into the past to print all those books and make the game. All to make us unwary of its true goals, world domination and the extinction of the human race!" Old Irvine gets more agitated with each word he hears.

"And the new sky? That's because it send machines really far back to mine those stars. There's an armada of intelligent machines coming!"

"Stop, you two. That joke's gone on long enough. Apologize, now!" O'Malley bellows. Then he turns to Irvine, "Don't worry Irvine. They are making that up."

Both boys look contrite and apologize.

"Sorry, Irvine."

"Yeah. Sorry Irvine. It was just a joke."

With that the boys return to their game and Irvine mumbles in his beer about insolent young idiots.

"But really, there is only one working Mech on the entire earth. You don't really believe they will let you close to it?" Tom inquires.

"Not really. But there will be more. Everyone is researching how they work and how to build them. And the recruiter said, whenever there is a new weapon system, they will look to their experienced soldiers first. If i join now i'll be one of those, when the Mechs get really going. So for now he got me a slot as tanker and when the Mechs are there, I'll switch over." Gregory misses his shoot and they exchange places.

"Huh. You sure that's how it works?" Tom asks.

"The recruiter swore on it."

National Training Center
Fort Irwin, California
Earth
1 September 2005

The Hunchback class Battlemech stood behind a low hill that rose about as high as its waist. The pilot scanned the irregular plain in front of him with both sophisticated sensors and Mark I eyeballs, weapons ready to blast any enemy foolish enough to expose himself to the Hunchback's superior weaponry.

A Mad Cat, the iconic mech of General Kerensky's children, popped up into view. Reacting instantly, the Hunchback fired a long stream of shells from its single heavy autocannon. For the first second, the shells all struck the Mad Cat dead center, coring it. But then the never ending stream of shells began randomly snaking back and forth. The fire shredded the Mad Cat to pieces, and shredded the falling pieces into even more pieces.

"Goddammit!" Dana Zumross snarled in frustration as she watched the destruction of the paper target through a pair of binoculars. "I thought we had that fixed!"

"Problem, Miss Zumross?" asked the visiting Colonel from Russia in nearly flawless English. His presence was part of the ongoing integration of the first world militaries. He also had the unfortunate luck to be named Ivan *Kerensky*, for which he had received an endless amount of ribbing from his comrades since the Battle of New Zealand. "It looks to me like the target is well and truly destroyed."

"And had that been a real Mad Cat out there, Colonel, then it would have been barely inconvenienced," Dana told him. "BT armor is extremely tough. Our current objective is to get the VAC to do the same concentrated damage as Quasimodo's old heavy autocannon. That means concentrating all the damage in very tight shot groups instead of spreading it out all over the mech. Only the shot groups just refuse to stay concentrated! ARGH!"

"Now, now, Dana," Doctor Phil Cray said to her soothingly. "These

tests are teaching us a great deal. And the shot groups are staying tight for the ten settings and lower. Actually, I'm beginning to think that the problem may actually be fundamental to the VAC's design, or at least this particular VAC's design."

"What do you mean, Doctor?" Colonel Kerensky asked.

"We're using a modified Avenger cannon because that's the heaviest 'auto'cannon that we've ever built," Phil explained. "But a thirty millimeter caliber may just be too small for the job we're asking the VAC to do. I suspect that the bullet stream goes on for too long, and the consequent recoil too drawn out for the recoil compensators to handle. Anything above a ten setting is just too much."

"Phil might have a point," Dana added, still angry at the VAC's inability to emulate an AC-20. "Every class 20 Autocannon that I know of uses bigger shells. Hell, so do most class tens that I know of too."

"Exactly. I think we may have to go back and build a new VAC using larger shells," Phil continued. "I was thinking the 120mm ones used by Abrams tanks might be appropriate. But the problem there is that the existing barrels for them aren't designed with automatic fire in mind."

"On the other hand," Dana mused aloud. "They don't have to fire as fast either. We could go gatling style and use multiple barrels for that also."

"But that might exceed desired weight limits," Phil pointed out. "A single reinforced barrel might be better. In either case, we'd have to design a whole new feed mechanism to..."

As the two debated technical details in a manner that disturbingly suggested romantic foreplay, Colonel Kerensky shook his head at their antics and turned back to observe the testing. Quasimodo was busy blasting away at more faux Clan mechs, and Kerensky wondered if he should feel flattered or insulted.

The Split Axe

Port Krin, Antallos

The Periphery

"So, to what do I owe the beer, Colonel?" Lieutenant Koltan asked.

"Why whatever do you mean, Lieutenant Koltan?" Colonel Sanders replied innocently. "Can't a CO buy a drink for his newest officer?"

"Sir, I'm a damned Poor Bloody Infantryman commanding a small horde of PBIs," Koltan replied. "We're the lowest of the low, the peons that have to bow and scrape for our betters, the Mechwarrior. So when said Mechwarrior – a battalion commander that owns his own Mech battalion no less – acts like he's trying to butter up a mere PBI Lieutenant, said Lieutenant has a right to get a might paranoid. Especially since we joined up a week ago and weren't paid any special attention at all." Koltan paused, and then added a belated, "Sir."

"Well, I never thought I'd actually meet an honest pirate," Sanders said with a chuckle. "I like that. So I'll do you a favor, Lieutenant, and be honest in return. Do you know why I attached the Drakon and its complement directly to my Dark Wing?"

"I imagine it's not for the Drakon's hefty repair bill," Koltan said dryly. "Internal explosions are a bitch to repair." He swirled his beer mug thoughtfully. "And it certainly can't be for the sterling competence and bravery of its Captain."

"It could have been," Sanders said. He grimaced. "Then I actually got to know the man. His sole redeeming feature looks to be a miraculous ability to find competent people to make up for his own incompetence."

"Hmm, never noticed that about Mamoto before," Koltan mused. "But that alone can't be the reason you want to talk to me. A competent PBI is still just a PBI. And sir, I don't think I'm your type. You're certainly not mine, no offense."

"None taken," Sanders said, rolling his eyes.

"So what you must be looking for is information," Koltan concluded. "Specifically, you must be looking for information on our target, accurate info at that. Certainly not the bullshit Mamoto spews out."

"Right on target, Lieutenant," Sanders said, pleased. "Have you ever thought of becoming a Mechwarrior? A man of your obvious ability is just wasted in the infantry."

"Would that I could, sir," Koltan sighed. "But I got this rare condition – genetic the doctors tell me – that won't let me pilot a Mech. My brain's wired in such a way as to be completely incompatible with neurohelmets."

"Pity."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

White House
Washington DC
Earth

"What the hell is this?" President Ryan said, outraged. He waved the file that he had been handled in emphasis.

"Yeah, that was pretty much my first reaction too," his Secretary of Defense replied.

"They want us to LET pirates and raiders land on Earth?" Ryan said, refusing to be deflected from the issue. "What's the Pentagon thinking? We're putting nukes in orbit to prevent exactly this sort of thing. And now they want to let the bad guys in and endanger American... Earth's citizens?"

"Mister President... Jack," the SecDef said. "The problem is that we're in a strategic bind. And as long as we lack any kind of significant space flight ability, we'll stay in that strategic bind. This plan is designed to address that. Letting the next raiding group in will give us a shot at capturing their Dropship; we have Marine units training for boarding operations right now. If we can get the Dropship, we also get a shot at capturing their Jumpship as well."

"Okay, back up a bit," Ryan said. "What strategic bind?"

"At the moment, we're pretty much stuck on Earth," the SecDef said. "Getting nukes into orbit is pretty much the limit of our space travel ability. But the rest of the solar system is pretty much open for the taking. All it takes is one smart pirate or worse, a House unit, to go out and grab an asteroid. They could then drop it on us, and there would be nothing we can do to stop them. It'd be like that Armageddon movie."

"Dammit," Ryan muttered as he considered the implications. "What about all the money that we're throwing into fusion research? We have working samples of that technology."

"That might yield something usable as a spaceship engine in the future," the SecDef said. "But that's in the future. Right now, they still haven't managed sustained fusion yet, let alone designed a fusion rocket. The Generals think we might still have the element of surprise here. The last group of pirates was only met by infantry, a few planes, and a small ship. I understand that by BT standards, that's a pretty pathetic force. The next group might come in as fat, dumb, and happy as the last one so we should use that to our advantage while it lasts."

"I don't like the idea," Ryan said, scowling. "But I can't refute it out of hand either. But this is a world effort, so we're going to have to run this by our allies. But just one question: What happens if the next raiders come in force next time? What if there are more of them than we think we can handle?"

"Then we go back to plan A and use the orbital nukes on them," the SecDef said with a shrug. "But all our experts think that's extremely unlikely. They all agree that the largest force we're likely to see is something Company sized, say twelve mechs tops."

Diehl BGT Defense GmbH & Co. KG
Development Center Maasberg
Massberg, Germany
Earth
5th September 2005

Werner Pregnitz shook his head a little as he glanced at the pieces of the SRM that were laying on the table in front of him.

They had needed weeks to get the chemical analysis of the warheads explosives and the propellant of the solid-fuel flight motor.

One thing was for sure, the propellant was not that much more advanced compared to the propellants he knew. However it was pretty unstable and prone to cooking off under heat. At least you could let it fall down without going off. On the other side, it had much more performance than conventional propellants. It had to, considering that the SRM was about two thirds warhead and one third propellant.

Making it stable had cost much of that performance, making it only about five percent better than common propellants. The stable version wasn't much of a problem to make it, even with the current production setup. In fact, the higher ups had pretty much switched the production of the currently used propellants to the new he and his team had gotten from the SRM, to be used in the current production. Five percent more thrust was worst it.

And now this, the warheads explosives.

"So this is it?" he wondered and glanced at the lump of gray putty in his hand.

"Well, this is a close to the original we managed to get for now," the head of the warhead team, Thomas Berninger, noted.

Pregnitz glanced at Berninger.

"What's the problem?"

"Impurities. We're still trying to find out what causes them, but I'm sure that we can get the kinks out of it in the next few weeks."

Pregnitz nodded and placed the lump of putty back on the table. Thankfully, this explosive, currently named BT-1, needed a primary like other modern plastic explosives and but it could still cook off when on fire. Still, it had a higher performance compared to the likes of C-4.

He glanced back at the components of the single SRM they had. The missile was a very dump one. A simple ballistic missile for short ranges, not unlike the Hydra 70, only smaller.

"So, we could theoretically build these SRM's?"

"Theoretically? We can do it practically. Even without the warheads we could build casings and engines. If you want we can throw in a laser seeker in addition to the original guidance package."

Pregnitz chuckled. He heard quite a bit about what was going on in the military of Europe and the world, considering that Diehl had gotten a sample of the SRM and full production books for the RBS15 or the GMLRS. So he knew that the Bundeswehr planned to hand out laser designators to every unit of the Heer and put laser pods under any fighter the Luftwaffe had. Heck, the Heer had asked for their existing GMLRS to be refitted with laser seekers as guidance.

"Okay, knock yourself out," he notes to the assembled team leaders. "I want those laser guided SRMs. And try to look into LRMs and equipment to fire them from existing platforms. Oh and make sure to include mechanisms to prevent a cook off of the missile... Oh and look into the possibility of using the BT-1 on an existing 70mm missile."

Jumpship *Kip Branhagan*
Zenith Jump Point
Antallos System
11 September 3020

"Oh, this is very, very bad," the woman known only as "Tasha" murmured as another pair of radiant EM globes appeared out of nowhere in the middle of empty space. They marked the arrival of yet another pair of Jumpships in the already crowded jump point.

Despite being the trade hub for this chunk of the Periphery, Antallos' jump points hadn't seen this much traffic in centuries, not since the Star League's fall in fact. Controller Vorax was spending a hell of a lot of money to put every Jumpship that arrived in-system on retainer.

Tasha had no idea what Vorax's game plan was but it looked like he was putting together an invasion force... which was just insane. He had so far assembled two Mech battalions and the required Dropship and Jumpship capacity for them. If he invaded ANY House world, Davion or Kurita – or hell, Outworld Alliance for that matter – then the offended party would just move in and squash Port Krin flat. The only safe alternative would be some backwater Periphery world, but what world out here could possibly be worth sending a mech company, never mind two plus battalions?

On the other hand, that still didn't rule out that Vorax had just gone off the deep end with delusions of grandeur and decided that he could challenge a Successor State like... say, the Federated Suns. And if the Vorax intended to attack the Davion space, then it was the duty of Tasha and the *Kip Branhagan's* crew to warn their superiors about it. And if Vorax was going to invade *Kurita* space, then Tasha's superiors would want to know that too, if for entirely different reasons. They were undercover MIIO agents after all, and part of maintaining their cover included accepting a retainer that no Jumpship captain in their right mind would turn down was part of that. That gave them an inside track on whatever Vorax was up to.

The hyperspace globes vanished, leaving behind a pair of Invader class Jumpships.

"Okay, people," Tasha said to the bridge crew. "Take a look and tell me what we have on the new guys."

"Okay, we have positive identification on the new arrivals," the *Kip's* sensors officer said a few minutes later. "Their logos match with what we have for the Band of the Damned. Dropships include three Leopards, a Union, a Mule, and... holy shit!"

Controller's Residence

Port Krin

Antallos

The Periphery

15 September 3020

"Ere, now, Vorax you mangy cur!" Black growled in outrage from the holo image being transmitted from his flagship's bridge. "What are ye playin' at?"

"Why, Colonel Black, whatever do you mean?" Controller Vorax asked innocently.

"Ye've got assault mechs waitin' to ambush me at yer spaceport!" Black shouted. "Ye didn't even respect me enough to hide them!"

"Oh, you have it all wrong, Colonel Black," Vorax smoothly assured the pirate. "The Dark Wing's assault lances are simply there to police all new arrivals and make sure they don't... get out of hand. They are there as much for my security as yours. Pirates can be such an unruly lot... not that I'm impugning your character in anyway."

"I don't trust ye, Vorax," Black said suspiciously. "What will ye do if I decide that this is a trap and decide to not go along with whatever ye have in mind, eh? What will you do then?"

"Why, absolutely nothing, Colonel Black," Vorax said. "If you don't want to take part in conquering the richest world you're ever likely to see with all the treasure that implies, then you're free to turn around and go home to your empty ball of rock with nothing to show for your trouble but a lot of wasted time, fuel, and food."

Black grunted like someone had just punched him.

"On the other hand, if you and your crew wish to be rich beyond your wildest dreams," Vorax went on. "Then please land, enjoy the hospitality of Port Krin – by paying for our services of course – and be sure to attend the Split Axe tomorrow at breakfast. You're the last one to arrive, so we'll be holding a briefing for all the unit commanders on Motherlode."

"Grr... okay, I'll play yer game for now, Vorax," Black snarled. "But this better be all you say or else." With that, the pirate commander, cut the connection.

"Pleasant man, this Black," Colonel Sanders said from off to the side where the holo-pickups wouldn't see him.

"Hmm, I considered not calling on him at all," Vorax admitted. "But the Band is the largest mech force on this side of the Inner Sphere... second to only your own of course."

"Of course," Sanders said sardonically, nodding. "By the way, did you know that the Band had an Overlord class Dropship before you called them?"

"Actually, no," Vorax replied. "Will this be a problem for you?"

"Not really," Sanders said with a shrug. "The more firepower, the better, I always say. And the more I look at Drakon's data on Motherlode, the more I think that I'm going to need all the firepower I can get."

"Surely, they can't stand up to a regiment's worth of Mechs!" Vorax said.

"Probably not," Sanders replied. "Ah, I'm just being overly paranoid in case the Motherloders surprise us with something."

**The Split Axe
Port Krin**

Antallos

The Periphery

16 September 3020

In the largest private room the Split Axe had, the commanders of Vorax's improvised regiment had assembled. The group was evenly divided into three obvious social groupings, each representing a battalion in the regiment. One were the officers of the Dark Wing, notable for the fact that they all had more or less identical uniforms and were relatively clean. The second was notable by their eclectic nature, a horde of varied uniforms and civilian dress comprised of every pirate, mercenary, or Antallos City State regular that Vorax had been able to hire, borrow, or sometimes just outright steal. And the third group was even scruffier and meaner looking than the second; the other two battalions were trying to keep as much distance between them and the Band of the Damned as much as the seating permitted.

A pretty woman in a ship's jumpsuit walked up the podium at the head of the room.

"Hello, everyone, I'm Jane Dietrich. Just so you know, I was on the Dropship that went down to Motherlode, so I have first hand experience of the planet in question. Not only that, I've been studying everything I could about this planet almost since we left it, which makes me the closest thing you're going to find to an expert here. So I'm about to tell you things about Motherlode that you might find unbelievable, but if you want to survive and get rich, then pay careful attention to everything I'm about to tell you. Got it? Okay now, *this* is Motherlode."

A holo image sprang into existence in front of the assembled pirates. A beautiful blue and green orb hung before them. It faded into a black sphere stippled with white lights then faded back to the blue and green. After a few seconds, it became obvious the image was cycling back and forth between both patterns.

"These are the composite day time and night time views of Motherlode. All the white lights you see in the night time view are cities."

Murmuring started up among the pirates tinged with surprise.

"Yeah, that's a lot of people. We're looking at a population count generally not seen outside the really good worlds of the Inner Sphere; we're estimating something like maybe two or three billion. On the plus side, all indications are that this is one of those really good worlds whose environmental conditions are just ideal for humanity. And just the industrial might required to build and support all those cities means there's literally more loot than we can possibly carry away once we've beaten off the militia."

More murmuring from the crowd, this time tinged with avarice.

"Now this brings us to the bad news. The *Drakon* picked the most isolated, most vulnerable looking target to raid, and we still lost all four Mechs, a valuable Mech recovery vehicle, and damn near half our infantry complement to the locals. They seemed less interested in recovering what little loot we had taken – and yes, it WAS little, not even a tithe of what was actually there – than in trying to kill us. Now there's a possibility that we landed right in the middle of their headquarters for planetary defense or something, but maybe not. For all we know, every city down there is this well defended."

The Holo image switched to a Hermes II being nailed by unusually large missiles and exploding.

"One mech was taken down by fighters, although admittedly it was by being shot in the back and suffering an internal ammo explosion."

Several faces winced. Mechs were damn near the most valuable things that most of them had, and ammo explosions tended to leave precious little behind in the way of salvage.

"How the other Mechs got taken out had to be reconstructed from our recorded radio chatter and watching some of the locals' news broadcasts. One mech got buried alive, intentionally we think. One got taken out by infantry with satchel charges. And one was apparently taken intact, although we have no idea how that happened."

The holo changed again, this time displaying a 2D image of soldiers partying on and around a shutdown but reasonably intact Hunchback.

"The *Drakon* itself got into a duel with this thing."

The holo dutifully displayed a boat of some sort sitting in the water. The boat was almost alien in its design, giving little clue in how big it actually was. Something was flashing on its bow.

"This ladies and gentlemen is some kind of autocannon. Not very powerful, but they got in a couple lucky hits that did near crippling damage to the *Drakon*. Worse, they started shooting at us using indirect fire, which means that the can and will use autocannon like artillery pieces. Then there's this."

Weapons fire reached out from the Holo's point of view toward the boat in the water. The holo focused on one missile volley whose missiles began exploding far short of the boat itself.

"At first, I had no idea what this was until I talked to a few lostech experts. And this is lostech, people, make no mistake about it. It's what's called an 'anti-missile system', a specialized machine gun designed to literally shoot missiles out of the sky."

More murmuring, some of it tinged with skepticism, some with fear.

"Now, it's not all doom and gloom. While the local militia might a little tough, but they've got one glaring weakness that's going to let us stomp all over them."

The image switched back to the boat being shot at. This time, it was focused on the boat and it was pretty obvious that it was being torn up far too easily by the firepower hitting it. The holo then switched to a fighter flying through the air; it was hit once by a stream of autocannon fire and just disintegrated.

"As near as we can tell, armor is a totally alien concept to these people. The best strategy when dealing with Motherlode's militia that

I can recommend is to evade or shrug off their attacks as best you can until you can shoot them with something. Anything will do, even a puissant little machine gun. And best of all, they have no Battlemechs at all. Their news reports after the raid made that pretty clear; they thought Mechs were fictional up until then."

A few people laughed at that.

"And that concludes my report. I'll be available after the meeting to provide copies of the data to whoever wants one. Colonel Sanders of the Dark Wing will be providing the operational details. Colonel?"

The woman was replaced at the podium by the Dark Wing's CO.

"Thank you, Jane. Okay you shitholes, listen up because we're getting one thing straight right now. I'm in charge."

Angry and indignant shouts rose up to meet Sanders.

"QUIET!!!"

Silence fell, but not without a few grumblings.

"I'm in charge because Vorax wanted a professional to ride heard on you lot. Now, if your independence is more important to you than all the loot the lovely Jane Dietrich just described – loot that includes lostech I might remind you – then you can leave right now and I won't stop you. But if you leave, you are definitely NOT coming with us. Now who's leaving?"

There was a lot of looking at each other, but no one got out of their seats.

"Okay, then. That said, I'm under no delusions that I can actually control you lot once we reach Motherlode. So my strategy is simple. Each unit picks one or more area that they'd like to have and attack it. Each of you will carve your own fief out of whatever you pick. If you pick an area that ain't as rich as you like, then tough. You could try picking up and hitting some place else so long as it isn't already claimed by another one of us. If you're big enough losers that you

actually need to call for help from someone else, then you better hope whoever comes to your rescue doesn't charge too hefty a fee for the service."

Sanders gave a shark toothed grin.

"And if ANY of you violates these rules, especially the one about not attacking each other, then I have a couple of assault lances who will so kick your asses. Don't make it necessary."

There were a few frantic nods, although Colonel Black just stared at Sanders with narrowed eyed suspicion.

"Okay, the second most important thing, and the one that's actually easier to enforce, is that we all arrive in the Motherlode system together. How we do that is simple. Only one jumpship – mine incidently – will have the actual destination coordinates. The coordinates for each system will only be handed out right before each jump, accounting for the time each of you will actually need to do the jump calculations. There will be no hotloading of KF drives to get ahead of the competition here people."

A star system map appeared on the holoprojector.

"Our ultimate destination as a group will be Motherlode's zenith point. After that, I expect that you'll all try and get ahead of each other and claim all the best spots before the others get there. So you have three options."

The holo zoomed in on the third planet. It had a single moon orbiting it. A point flashed between the two bodies.

"This is the closest pirate point to Motherlode. Although this is the point used by the *White Elephant* and the *Drakon*, I don't recommend it. First, because it's also the hardest point to hit. And second, because it's also the smallest point, too small for all our jumpships to jump into. If more than one of you goes there at a time, there's a damned good chance that you'll wind up with interpenetrating hyperspace fields and kill each other."

Several members of the audience winced at that. The holo zoomed out, this time holding the planet and its star in view. A point between them flashed.

"This is option two. This pirate point is actually big enough to hold our fleet. It's the one I recommend because, well, it's the one I intend to use."

He grinned again at the crowd, as if sharing a joke. A few of them actually laughed.

"And finally, if your navigator isn't good enough to handle jump point calculations, then Motherload is only a nine day trip at one gee from the Zenith point. Of course, by that time, most of us will have been there for nearly a week, so any Johny-come-latelies will just have to pick whatever's left unclaimed. Any questions?"

Comstar Compound

Port Krin

Antallos

The Periphery

21 September 3020

"Precentor, Vorax's fleet has just jumped out. We received a couple coded transmissions from them before they did."

"Ah?"

"One is addressed to the MIIO. The other is to ISF. They're contents are heavily encrypted."

"Of course they are, Short, but it hardly takes a genius to figure out what the contents are."

"The first set of coordinates to Motherlode?"

"Assuming it really exists. Well, give them here. I'll make sure these get to their proper recipients."

"Davion, Kurita, and our message archives on Terra? I must admit

Precentor that it disturbs me that we read our clients' mail."

"Oh, don't be silly, Short; such notions are got you exiled to the back end of beyond here with me in the first place. We do not read out clients' mail. We just store copies in case the first effort to send them somehow gets lost."

"Oh, of course, Precentor. How silly of me."

"Don't you take that sarcastic tone with me, you young whippersnapper!"

Location: Invader class Jumpship "Roach Motel"
En route to "Motherload."
ETA: ?? jumps.

Carl Jixton was not what most would call a stoic man. Rather, he was a pirate in the finest traditions of piracy, stretching all the way back to ancient Terra. Jixton spent his days drinking and womanizing, looting and plundering. If man could be said to be born into a role, Jixton's birthplace was a pirate mech, mere seconds away from dropping down on some hapless mark. Piracy was in his blood, and indeed, his very soul.

When he heard of Motherload, he was skeptical. A successful and more importantly living pirate knows when a song is too sweet to be true. His instincts screamed at him: Motherload wouldn't be an easy mark. Nobody left billions of people and the industry to support them unattended. Not for long, anyway.

But when he learned that the jumpship he'd docked to had, amongst other things, a small bar on its gravity deck, he knew it was a sign from the divine. He was clearly meant to wash his suspicions away with a good bottle of rum. Clearly! Besides, there was no harm in it. The floatilla was a long distance from motherload yet, and until then, the only things he could do were twiddling his thumbs and hitting on all the bed warmers within twelve parsecs.

Jackpot. The bar had the two things, discounting mechs and plundering, that he loved most in his life. Rum and women. Two women. One, a lush looking brunette with decent size knockers and a dark blue mechwarrior's jumpsuit, and the other, a smaller waif of a blonde wearing slightly greasy technician overalls. They were sitting at one table, laughing together without hardly a care.

Jixton grinned, put on his best "I'm a powerful and confident mechwarrior, both of you girls want to bed me at once" smile and advanced towards the pair.

As he moved forward, he caught their conversation.

The brunette spoke first, waving a hand and setting her drink down. "So he said "Did you get your mech from a scrap yard?" Now let me tell you something, Dani. I'm not going to let anyone, much less an inbred Liao noble insult my mech. So I charged the PPC and blew my load right in that fucker's face. No ejection pod, no muss, no fuss."

"You know, Natalie, if you had a stinger like the rest of the lance, you'd have been fucked with a capital F. You're using that Battlemaster as a crutch, and I'm worried that PPC's going to start going sooner or later." The blonde replied.

"That's why we're heading to motherload. They've got Lostech, Dani, so surely they can fix up Old Melville. If you think I'm giving up my PPC just because we couldn't maintain it, you've got another thing coming."

Jixton had his opening, "Ah! It's good to meet fellow PPC enthusiasts! I'm Carl Jixton, scourge of the successor states and lover of beautiful women across the sphere!"

Then, bowing low, voice full of mock-nobility, he said: "Please, allow me to buy both of you delectable goddesses some drinks!"

The girls shared a glance and a giggle. Then the brunette replied, "Of course! Please, have a seat."

"So you two know each other?" Jixton asked, calling the bartender and adding another round for each of them on his tab.

"Yeah, I'm Natalie and this is my best tech, Dani. We're from Jolly Roger. You know, the Leopard docked closest to this bucket's ass?"

He didn't, but if there was one thing that motivated Carl Jixton to lie, it was getting into a woman's pants. "Yeah. So, what company are you with?"

"Freelance in every sense of the word. My lance and I do a little raiding here, a little merc-work for periphery dung-worlds there. If Motherload's as rich as everyone says it is, every last mechwarrrior on this little expedition will be set for life. If it's half as rich as that, we'll

still be set for life." The brunette, Natalie apparently, replied.

Jixton had to admit that he found her intriguing; He'd never bedded another mechwarrior before. That'd be a nice notch on his belt - It'd have a place of honor, right next to that noble's daughter he'd had back on Kentares.

"So you command a whole lance, Natalie? Wow, I'm impressed. And if I overheard you earlier, you have a battlemaster? Don't take this the wrong way, but how did you get an assault mech? Usually you have to be pretty damn rich, periphery-wise, to have one."

Natalie flashed a coy smile and raised both her eyebrow and her drink.

"Come on, Nat. Tell him. It's a cute story," Dani said.

"Okay, okay," Natalie replied. "It's like this,"

Jixton moved forward in his seat, ready to listen. Pirates always listened to stories. Smart pirates are ones that pay attention to things.

"Have you ever heard of Ivan the Unstoppable?" Natalie began.

"Yeah. He was... Unstoppable?" Jixton had no idea who they were talking about.

Dani giggled. Natalie snorted. "Not so much, no. He was this badass mechwarrior. A real nasty pirate lord. Had a whole company and everything. Now, I didn't like him much. Let's just say he had cruel tastes towards women, yeah?"

"More importantly, though, he had this battlemaster. Beautiful, beautiful machine. Star-League vintage, and lovingly maintained." Dani added. "Pimped out with all sorts of bling. Freezers - you know, double heat sinks - and all the lostech goodies you'd expect. He found it in a cache somewhere."

"How did you end up with it then?" Jixton asked.

"See, on the battlefield, Ivan was unstoppable. A lostech assault mech? He was practically a god in the periphery. But outside that mech, he was just any other man."

"Ah! Gotcha. So you waited until he dismounted to stretch out his legs. I'm impressed, Natalie." Jixton replied.

"Not exactly." Dani giggled.

"He had a weakness for women. He burnt through slavegirls like a largelas through paper. So I dressed up as a slave and used my feminine wiles to get him to buy me. Then, snip snip stab, and I'm making off with a mint condition battlemaster. Sto-err, borrowed it right from under his men's noses. Permanently borrowed, if you get me."

Jixton felt a terrible tingle in his groin as she described, in loving detail, what exactly 'snip snip stab' meant. "Did you at least give him his money's worth?"

Natalie smiled. "Of course. I'm not totally heartless, and it's not like he was an unappealing specimen on the physical front. But hey, my callsign isn't Black Widow for nothing, y'know? I have to keep up my reputation."

"To be honest, I'd been planning on asking you to my cabin for a night of sin and debauchery, but I've suddenly reconsidered," Jixton gulped. "Still, the drinks are on me. Consider it payment for the story."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to... rearm my mech. Yeah."

"Aww, Nat, why did you have to scare this one away? I was up for, what was it, "a night of sin and debauchery"?" Dani giggled as Jixton beat a hasty retreat. "Just because you're pining for a dead guy doesn't mean the rest of us shouldn't have fun."

"What, humiliating him wasn't fun?" Natalie replied.

"Sure it was, but I could've used a change from El Vibrato." Dani

replied.

"Aww, you're no fun." Natalie pouted.

Interlude: The Road Trip

Waypoint One
Uninhabited Star System
The Periphery
28 September 3020

"Thirty minutes to jump," the PA announced.

One week, Sanders thought to himself as he rested – slumping in your chair just wasn't possible in microgravity - in his office on board the Dropship *Shadow Wing*. For one week the fleet had sat idle in this uninhabited star system, recharging their KF drives. For one week he had acted the leader, enforcing his authority upon his subordinates. For one week, he had been dealing with his subordinates, the overgrown babies that were otherwise known as mercenaries and rogues and pirates.

God, being in transit while on campaign should have been quiet time, at least far as CO duties were concerned. Mechwarriors and aerospace pilots should have been training in sims, keeping their skills sharp. Techs should have been double-checking mechs and vehicles, making sure everything was operational. That anyway was what Sanders' own Dark Wing was doing. They were professionals.

Not so, everyone else.

The other two "battalions" were an unruly lot, and the boredom of interstellar travel wore away at them. With no planets with innocent populations to raid, they had instead turned on each other. Some fights had gotten bad enough that Sanders had to intervene personally. Finally, he had resorted to simply abandoning any offending unit, leaving them behind here with no new coordinates to jump to or in extreme cases, just no Jumpship.

Yeah, that had gone over well. At least now the fighting was limited to words. Mostly.

The intercom beeped. Sanders automatically punched a button on his

desk.

"What?" he snarled into the intercom.

"Signal from the *Black Eye*, Colonel," came the crisp reply. "Colonel Black wants to have a word with you."

"Oh, God, what does that idiot want now?" Sanders groaned. "Wait, never mind. Just patch him through."

The ugly countenance of the Band of the Damned's leader appeared above Sanders' desk. Idly, Sanders wondered if the devil looked like Black. He decided not; the devil would at least have the sense to make himself look threatening.

"Sanders, ye bloody cur!" Black began. "What the meaning of this. This next system can't be where the Motherlode be!"

"No it's not, Black," Sanders said, affecting a bored tone. Well, not that affected. "What's your point?"

"Me point?" Black said angrily. "Where's Motherlode. Ye be leading us off into the back end of beyond to die of hunger and thirst!"

"Hardly," Sanders snorted contemptuously. "If your water recyclers are in decent condition, thirst won't be an issue... although taste might. And if you read the briefing material passed out, you would have known to stock up on food stuffs and hydroponics equipment before we set out."

"What?" Black said, outraged. "PAY for food? At Port Krin's outrageous prices?"

"There's a reason I told you that everyone needed a four months' supply of food," Sanders said coldly. "It was so that we could get to Motherload without starving on the way and still have something to eat in case something went wrong. And we still have a long way to go."

"I will nae starve!" Black shouted. "I demand we stop at the next

habitable planet and forage!"

"Sure, request granted," Sanders said condescendingly. He rubbed his forehead, miming deep thought. "If I recall correctly, the next habitable planet is... Motherlode."

"What? Yer joking!"

"Sorry, Black, but no," Sanders replied. "There are no lifebearing worlds at any of the systems that we're stopping at. If you want food, you're going to have to either rely on the charity of someone smarter than you – good luck with THAT by the way – or you're going to have to buy it from the same."

"Never!"

"Well, sorry to hear about that, Black," Sanders replied with mock sorrow. "We'll miss you as we step over your food starved corpses to help ourselves to all your gear. Sanders out."

Black's holo image vanished. Sanders relaxed and smiled. He felt much better now.

Waypoint Three
Uninhabited Star System
The Periphery
5 October 3020

"Jump complete," the *Shadow Wing's* PA announced.

"Bridge, this is the Colonel," Sanders said, hitting his intercom. "Everyone accounted for."

"Checking now, sir," came the reply. "One jumpship unaccounted for... or, there it is now. They jumped late, sir."

"Okay, that's fine. Sanders out..."

"Pardon, sir," the bridge officer interrupted. "The *Black Eye* is hailing us. It looks like Colonel Black again."

"Put him through," Sanders sighed. His desk's holo-projector sprang to life. Black wasted no time getting to the point.

"Are we there yet?"

Waypoint Four
Uninhabited Star System
The Periphery
12 October 3020

"Are we there yet?"

Waypoint Five
Uninhabited Star System
The Periphery
19 October 3020

"Jump complete," Jane Dietrich reported dutifully. "It looks like we still have all of our traveling companions. It's a miracle!"

"Very good, Jane," Captain Mamoto said cheerfully. He had been almost giddy since they had left the Antallos system. "Carry on."

"Skipper, can I ask you a question?" Jane asked, as she popped open her Motherloder computer and started its boot up sequence.

"Go ahead," Mamoto replied. "I'm a generous Captain."

"You're not worried that the Motherlodgers are going to make another attempt at the *Drakon*, are you?" Jane asked. "I mean, after what happened the first time we were there, I'd be worried."

"Nonsense," Mamoto said confidently. "We're carrying the Dark Wing's supplies and a good chunk of their support personnel and dependents. If there is one Dropship the Dark Wing absolutely has to defend, it's going to be this one."

"I dunno, skipper..."

"Don't worry too much about it, Jane," Mamoto assured her. It might have worked if she thought he had more tactical sense than what God gave a roach. "We're surrounded by the biggest and most powerful mech force this side of a Successor State. What could possibly go wrong?"

Waypoint Six
Uninhabited Star System
The Periphery
26 October 3020

"Are we there yet?"

Waypoint Seven
Uninhabited Star System
Granville Cluster
2 November 3020

"Jump completed," the *Kip Branhagan's* navigator announced on the ship-wide broadcast. As he switched off the PA system, he frowned at his display. "That can't be right."

"Problem?" Tasha asked. The MIIO agent hung out on the bridge a lot these days, mostly to avoid randy pirates in search of a good lay. At first, she had hung out with them in the hopes of learning something useful. All too soon, it became obvious that they didn't know anything.

"I don't know, ma'am," the navigator replied. He pointed at one of his displays. "According to this, the stars here are wrong."

"What do you mean, wrong?" Tasha asked.

"The stars are wrong," the navigator told her. "They don't match what we have in the navigational database for the Granville cluster."

"Maybe the database is out of date," suggested the *Kip's* captain suggested as he drifted over. "How old is our data on the Cluster?"

"Pretty old," the navigator replied. "But there's too much difference

for the changes to be stellar drift."

"Oh, Jesus," Tasha groaned. "Don't tell me these idiot pirates got us lost."

"No, no," the navigator said hastily. "The coordinates check out. So do the stars outside the Cluster. The stars inside the Cluster are a different matter..." His computer beeped. "Huh, now that's really weird."

"What now?"

"I think our nav computer is packing up," the navigator said, looking at Tasha and the captain wide eyed. "It's saying... it's saying the star below us is Wolf 359."

Silence reined on the bridge for several seconds as everyone digested the implications. Finally, Tasha spoke.

"Where's that?"

Zenith Jump Point
System S3-19570410
Grantville Cluster
9 November 3020

In an area of space devoid of any mass but passing solar winds, multiple globes of sundered space-time flared into being. The globes had no right to exist, singing their violation of the cosmic Order of Things for all to hear in the form of a massive outpouring of electromagnetic radiation on nearly all frequencies.

The event did not go unnoticed by outside observers. Satellites and ground based stations had been scrutinizing this area for the past six months as well as a similar area on the other side of the system's primary. They saw the globes of radiation, saw them vanish, and saw them replaced with the much dimmer forms of many, many Jumpships.

However, they did not see nor hear the radio waves carrying the

voices of those within. But the inhabitants guessed that those transmissions would be there and wondered what malevolent and devious schemes were being laid within them.

"Are we there yet?"

"YES! Yes, we're there, God dammit! Now shut up and leave me the fuck alone!"

Waypoint Six
Uninhabited Star System
Granville Cluster
2 November 3020

Major Andreas Staedele, commanding officer of the mercenary outfit Buron Cav, or what was left of it, was sitting on a ledge in the Mech cubicle on board the unit's sole remaining dropship, the Union-class Distant Home, and thinking about how he and his unit had come to get into this mess. His thoughts were interrupted however, when somebody entered the bay. "So that's where they found the place to hang the laundry out to dry. Thought you were here. Only place in the ship where no-one's around at this time."

"Hey, Ned," Staedele replied. Lieutenant Celic "Ned" Nedeljko, Staedele's XO, was wearing the same nonchalant smile as ever as he sat down on the ledge, right next to his commander and close friend, eying the laundry lines hanging between the Cavs only remaining 'Mechs.

"So, Andy, what are you brooding about?" Nedeljko started the conversation.

Staedeles reply came quickly, "About this entire clusterfuck we're in, what else? First we get our battalion put through the blender on the raid of that god-forsaken mudball Thestria, then we almost run out of money, and now we have to work for scum like Vorax. I don't like, Ned. Not one bit. If there's any kind of god, I just hope he's got something very special in store for the damned 21st Galedon Regulars!"

"Amen to that", Nedeljko replied, "I don't like this assignment here, either. I mean, seriously, a highly industrialized, almost undefended planet that far out? I think somebody has had a few drinks too much, but as long as Vorax pays us, it's not like I should complain. Those C-Bills could very well be the kind of godsend we are in a dire need right now."

"Yeah, the payment's good for what they told is this would be about.

Land on a valuable looking piece of real estate on planet primitive backwater, hold it 'till the okay reaches Port Krin and Vorax' security goons come in, get paid and get out. But something irks me about this. I've got a bad feeling," Staedele continued.

Nedeljko laughed. "Oh dear, you're almost sounding like Tom right now." Tom Lemell, one of the other Mechwarriors the Cav still had, was infamous for his pessimism and sometimes outright bitterness.

"If you think so", Staedele replied, "Hell, whatever. I'll let all these morons and psychos Vorax has hired besides us take the lead. Let these idiots discover whatever defensive assets "Motherload" has by running straight into them. If half the tales these guys told are true, there'll still be enough left for us afterwards."

"How... mercenary of you," Nedeljko grinned.

"Why, thank you. I'm doing my best. And frankly, anyone killing some of these goons would do mankind a favour. I'd do it myself if someone paid me for it. Hell, I'd do it at a discount rate," Staedele mused.

This caused Nedeljko to laugh again. "Your word to God's ears, Andy, your word to God's ears."

"Yeah. So, it's still six hours till the next jump. Time to-" Staedele said, before being interrupted by the sound of the bay door opening.

"You here, Dad?" a melodic voice sounded.

"Over here, darling. What's up?" Staedele replied, walking over to his 9-year-old daughter, Esther Staedele.

"Mom and Auntie Hanna say that food's ready, and you two should come right now if you want to get something before the jump."

"Well, Ned, how could anyone resist against such despicable blackmail?" Staedele said with a big grin.

"No idea, Andy, no idea. Let's go and eat something. Who knows, we

might be finally there after the next jump."

"Let's just hope it. Black's constant heckling is slowly pissing off our esteemed "Col." Sanders."

In a pretty good imitation of Col. Black's voice, Nedeljko replied: "Are we there yet?"

After that, the three walked off to the mess hall laughing.

Disclaimer: Thanks goes to Psycko for proofreading/editing.

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White House

Washington D.C. United States of America

Earth

9 November 2005

With a sigh Jack Ryan lifted the next file in the small mountain of paperwork he had to review. He wanted to keep abreast of the efforts to counter the threat of future invasions and that meant reports.

In this case, a status report of the rearmament of the United States Ballistic Missile submarine fleet. As part of the nascent GDI efforts it had been agreed between him and his Russian counterpart to suspend their ABM agreement in the face of the new threat. Fortunately, the inefficiency that had plagued Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union meant that most the Russian SSBN fleet had yet to be sent to be breakers. They were in dire need of refit after sitting for several years without maintenance, but they were still intact.

The US hadn't, instead choosing to deploy their super silent former boomers as "Slow Attack" boats. After some negotiation it had been agreed to rearm them with missiles capable of hitting an orbiting target with a thermonuclear weapon, a feat accomplished by placing a second state on the missile, removing its MIRV capability but allowing it to threaten anything that dared enter low orbit with a nuclear tipped Anti-satellite missile. To ensure that the established rules were followed and that they could not be deployed against

targets on the Earth, the Missile officer who held the second key was to be a Russian on the American ships, and an American on the Russian subs, once they were able to be redeployed.

So far status reports looked good. The Ohio had just completed its refit and two others were already in the slips being refitted with the new missiles and given their deployable targeting uplinks to Cheyenne and Kosvinsky Mountains. Several of the missiles on Ohio lacked their warheads and were going to be used to hit a series of orbital targets. Test was scheduled for Tuesday.

Putting down the file he smiled. Once the missile fleet was back up and running Earth would have something that even by Inner Sphere standards would be an uncomfortably potent orbital defense system. With a smile he picked up the next file, which if he was not mistaken was the test reports on the prototype Rail Gun that had just been fitted to the USS Kidd.

His head turned when he heard the phone ring. Slowly he lowered the file down and lifted the phone.

"Mister President?" the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of staff said on the other side of the line. He seemed tense, which in turn made Jack tense. When one of the most important men in the united states military was edgy, it wasn't a good thing.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked.

"We just got a call from NORAD. KF entry signatures have been detected at the sun's zenith jump point. They're back sir."

"How many?"

"We're not sure yet," the CotJCoS admitted, "But there's a lot of them. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say its an invasion fleet."

Jack gritted his teeth biting back a curse. "Bring us to DefCom 1 and stand ready to institute Operation: MINUTEMAN," he said, referring to what had to be one of the most elaborate and controversial civil defense programs in the history of the United States.

They'd shipped almost fifteen million pieces of infantry weaponry to police stations, military depots, and specially formed civil defense armories all around the country with order to deploy them in the event of an invasion. Everything from civilian hand guns and sixty year old military surplus, to modern assault rifles, even some of the recently reverse engineered manpack SRMs. If they tried to invade the US they'd find a rifle behind every blade of grass.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Not yet, sir, but we'll keep you up to date."

"Good. I need to make some calls."

"Yes sir."

With a click the line was clear, and he immediately reached for the Red Phone just to have it ring before he could touch it. He let out a somewhat amused snort as he picked it up. At least he didn't have to worry about waking anyone. Sleepy Russians were cranky and that was the last thing he needed right now.

NORAD
Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado
Earth
10 November 2005

Things had certainly changed in here over the past six months, General David Matthews thought to himself as he entered the nerve center for the United States' – and now the planet's – defense. Once upon a time, the three big screens up on the wall would have showed a 2D map of the Earth's surface with wavy lines across them representing orbiting satellites. Now, that display had been pushed off to the side so that it only occupied the right screen. The left screen showed a 3D graphic of Earth and the moon. The middle showed a similar graphic of the inner solar system, with a mass of red icons directly above the yellow sphere representing the Sun.

"Morning, sir," Colonel Weyland said to the General quietly.

"Morning, Colonel," Matthews replied. He nodded at the screens. "Any change?"

"No, sir," Weyland informed him. They both knew what that meant.

What would happen the next time some BT ship came had been discussed to death over the past six months since the pirate raid. Every BT sourcebook had been analyzed and debated endlessly by military planners and civilians alike. Sourcebook information had been checked against data accumulated from prisoner interrogations. Agreement on the rough capabilities of BT Jumpships and Dropships had been reached quickly. Contingency plans had been laid out, and certain rules had been written to deal with every conceivable scenario.

Like this one.

If this fleet hadn't deployed Dropships yet, then that could mean one of two things. The first was that they were merely passing through; in everyone opinion, this was highly unlikely given how far off the beaten track Earth was. The second was that they were coming to

Earth and that they were going to take a "pirate" point to do so; this was considered the more likely scenario and the sheer number of ships suggested that this couldn't possibly be anything but an invasion force. But that left only one question.

"So, Colonel," Matthews began. "Which pirate point do you think they're going to use?"

Dropship *Shadow Wing*
Zenith Jump Point
System S3-19570410
10 November 3020

The intercom beeped.

"Sanders, go."

"Colonel, Bridge. We have an incoming message addressed to you."

"Okay, what does Black want this time?"

"It's not from Colonel Black, sir." The officer at the other end hesitated. "It's from Motherlode."

Sanders' eyebrows rose in surprise. Most other Periphery backwaters wouldn't have been able to pick up jumpships at a jump point. On the other hand, most of those worlds wouldn't have had the level of industrialization that Motherlode had either. Sanders took a moment to silently berate himself for taking something like this for granted, and wondered what else his preconceptions had missed.

"Alright," he said after a moment. "Let me hear it."

"Unidentified fleet, this is President Ryan of the planet Earth," the message began. It was somewhat static filled, but understandable. "If you come in peace, then the people of this planet will welcome you with open arms and would welcome the opportunity to discuss trade and the opening of interstellar relations with whatever State you represent. However, if you come with hostile intent," the voice of President Ryan grew hard, "then we will defend our world with every

resource at our disposal. And I should warn you, if you approach our planet without our express permission, we will assume that you are hostile and react accordingly. We await your reply. President Ryan out."

Sanders thought about it, a plan percolating in his mind. If he could convince this "President Ryan" that his fleet were in fact friendly, then they could pull a Trojan Horse and land unopposed. And with the planet's leader on hand, they could swoop in and capture him, taking the whole planet in one fell swoop!

"Bridge, Sanders. Has any reply been sent yet?"

"Yes, sir. Colonel Black has already transmitted a reply that, ah, basically amounts to his boasting how he was going to, ah... establish relations. Only his actual words included a great deal of profanity and lurid description."

"God damn it!"

Interplanetary space

System S3-19570410

14 November 2005/3020

The probe had actually been designed by NASA for surveying Mars. It carried the latest in ion drive technology, allowing it to continuously accelerate for months at a time at its modest 0.05 standard gravities. But that had all changed many months ago when invaders from out of fiction had hit Earth many months ago.

Now it was steadily accelerating for the fourth Lagrange point created by the balance of conflicting forces of inertia and gravity between the planet Earth and the star it orbited. It was not a true "jump point" for the forces of gravity did not truly drop below the threshold that the Kearny-Fuchida drive needed to operate. But the probe could be parked there and remain on station indefinitely without expending fuel.

In the meantime, the probe was keeping watch on the Lagrange point that could be used by KF drives, for that point sat squarely between

Earth and the Sun. Theoretically a jump signature there could be washed out and be rendered undetectable by the blinding glare of the star behind it. The probe's position was placed precisely to make sure than any such signature was detected, unimpeded by the Sun's light.

By sheer happenstance, there was already a space probe at the L1 point. SOHO – the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory – had been launched in 1995 for the purpose of gathering data on the Sun. There had been talk about using SOHO alone to monitor the Lagrange point for KF activity, but that had been shot down when it was pointed out that the first thing any invader using the point would do would be to destroy the probe with exotic space weapons.

Which is what happened, only not exactly as envisioned. SOHO was smeared into constituent atoms when the space it occupied was rent asunder by a hyperspace bubble.

The other probe saw it all and dutifully reported it via tight beam radio.

Bridge

Dropship *Shadow's Wing*

Motherlode-Sun Pirate Point

"Jump complete," the PA announced.

"Sensors online, checking local space," the *Wing's* sensor officer reported.

"Engineering reports all systems are green," the communications officer reported.

"Beginning disengagement from Jumpship," announced the helmsman.

"All ships accounted for but one," the sensor officer added. "No, wait. There it is, at the planet-moon point."

"Of course, someone wants to leapfrog in early," Sanders sighed. "Let me guess, it's Black and the Band, right?"

"Uh, no sir," came the reply. "Both Band Jumpships are with us. The leapfrogger is the *Kip Branhagan* . They're carrying independents."

Magni said:

Bridge

Dropship *Distant Home*

Motherload-Sun Pirate Point

14 November 2005/3020

"And there we have the obligatory moron jumping ahead." Major Staedele remarked with a slight grin.

"I owe you 5 C-Bills, Andreas," Hanna Staedele, the major's aunt and captain of the *Distant Home* replied.

"So, let's see how those idiots do. Heh, they'll make for a perfect scout detail that way, and nobody's going to shed a tear if they get their heads torn off by the locals." Staedele continued. "And Hanna, keep us at the far end of this mob, with about ten thousand kilometers distance or so as a safety margin. We're not in a hurry."

"Aye, aye, skipper," the old woman replied cheerfully.

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Situation Room

White House

Washington DC

Earth

"Okay, this was unexpected," Ryan said aloud.

In all the contingency planning done for possible invasion scenarios, this one hadn't come up before. It had generally been agreed on by both military planners and civilian consultants that any invasion by

BT forces would have everyone coming in all at once. After all, there was little point in sending anyone ahead to be defeated in detail before the main force could arrive and save it.

Only, it looked like this invasion force had done just that.

"So what am I looking at?" Ryan continued.

"It looks like the early birds are three *Leopards*, Mister President," Brigadier General McMayers said as he studied the data. "Those profiles are distinctive; they're basically just flying bricks. Carrying capacity's not much better than a single *Union*, but the odds that they're all carrying a full load of mechs are probably pretty good.

"Now the main body is a different kettle of fish," McMayers went on. "They're still detaching from their Jumpships and sorting themselves out, so it's difficult to get a hard count. There's lots more *Leopards*, some other aerodyne types, and lots of spheroids most of which appear to be *Unions*, but it's hard to tell spheroid-type Dropships apart. But there is definitely an egg-shape in there, meaning at least one *Overlord*.

"At a guess," Mayers concluded, "they're sending a probe ahead as a sacrificial lamb to see what kind of defenses we built in the last six months. Clever. I wouldn't have thought they'd do that given how valuable Dropships are to them... or at least how valuable we think they are."

"Any good news?" Ryan asked, disgruntled. This was far more force than he had really expected even in his worst nightmares.

"I'm not sure, but I think the probe force is going for a landing on the far side of the planet from the main body," McMayers said. He smiled humorlessly. "Unless they drop off a communications satellite before hitting atmosphere, there's no way that they're going to be able to call for help if they get in trouble."

"Hmm, can we hit the probe with the orbital launchers without the main body seeing?" Ryan asked.

This provoked a quick discussion with the National Science Advisor.

"We don't think so, Mister President," McMayers finally answered.

"Okay, then," Ryan said unhappily. "Pass the word to our allies to let the probe through unmolested. We'll save the nukes for the mainbody."

"Assuming they work," McMayers sighed.

"Assuming they work, yes," Ryan agreed.

**Situation Room
White House
Washington DC
Earth**

15 November 2005/3020

"I think we have final entry dispositions now," McMayers said. He pointed at the display. "This group here is the one with the *Overlord*; we're calling them Force Alpha. This one over here we're calling Force Bravo, it's mostly made up of *Unions*. The rest are pretty much scattered all over the place in ones and twos; those we've given number designations.

"There also close enough that our satellites can get a look at their unit insignia. Alpha and Bravo appear to be mostly homogeneous units. The smaller groups appear to be all different units for some reason. And one other thing; our old friend the *Drakon* appears to be flying with Force Bravo."

"Are you sure?" Ryan asked.

"Pretty certain," McMayers replied. "They've got that same faded Federated Suns paint job and the armor on the nose looks a good deal more patchwork than it used to be."

Ryan filed that bit of information away. It might become useful later "Which launchers can engage which forces?"

"Unfortunately, we've spread the few launchers we had pretty thinly in orbit to cover all approaches," McMayers informed him. "Only A1, E3, and R2 are close enough to engage when they pass."

Ryan ran that through his mental inventory. Those were the first American, the third European Union, and the second Russian launchers. And they were lucky that E3 was in position to engage because it was in a polar orbit to cover any attempts to approach via the poles.

"Which of them can engage Force Alpha?" Ryan asked. "That *Overlord*

could be carrying thirty six mechs and six fighters. It's got to be our priority target."

"Heh, then you're in luck, Mister President," McMayers chuckled. "In ten minutes, all three launchers can engage at once. I assume you want to stagger the launches for time on target?"

In other words, Ryan mentally translated, did he want all the missiles to arrive at the same time and provide Alpha with the worst possible point defense problem?

"Yes, I think I do," Ryan answered. Then in a fit of whimsy, he added, "Make it so, Number One."

Dropship *Drakon* Inbound Earth Space

Captain Mamoto stared at the beautiful blue and green world that filled his screen, a giddy feeling of triumph welling up within him. Finally, he had returned to this bloody planet, and this time he had a huge military force with him, the largest the Periphery had ever seen since Kerensky's Exodus. Now the stupid Motherlodgers would learn the price of vandalizing his precious *Drakon* when he...

"That's weird," Jane Dietrich murmured, just loud enough for him to hear.

"What?" Mamoto said quickly, something cold crawling up his spine. "What's weird, Jane?"

"I'm not sure, skipper," the sensor officer replied. "There's something in orbit that I'm having trouble getting a radar read on. I would have thought that it was just the radar acting up, but then I pointed an optic camera at it and... well look at it for yourself."

Walking over to Jane's station, Mamoto peered at her display over her shoulder. The blue seascape of a Motherlode ocean filled the screen, featureless but for the white speckling of clouds and an ugly black silhouette in the shape of a cross. Even as he watched, it

seemed to change shape slightly and he realized that it was turning.

"What is it?" Mamoto asked, dread creeping into his stomach. "Is it a satellite?"

"I don't think so," Jane answered, frowning. "I think it's too big for that, bigger than any satellite that I can actually see anyway. I think it's more the size of an aerospace fighter given the zoom on the visual, maybe bigger. But it doesn't feel right; I don't think it's a fighter either."

"Come on, Jane," Mamoto scolded her irritably. "You're supposed to be better than that. Tell me something definitive."

"Skipper, I don't have any..." Jane began. "Huh, there's another one I think. Hold on..."

And then they both found out exactly what it was as alarms started blaring.

Low Earth orbit Earth Space

The box had been deliberately designed to be low visibility in space. It was painted pitch black and coated with a liberal layer of RAM, Radar Absorbent Material. Of course, in space, conditions were extreme and the box's temperature could soar high enough in direct sunlight to cook electronics and set off chemicals stored inside it. Heat in space could only be dumped via radiation, so the wide solar panels that provided the box with power also double as heat radiators.

It mostly worked, despite being a hastily assembled kludge. On reception of a radio signal through a backup receiver (the primary one had melted long ago), the box fired what maneuvering thrusters still worked and pointed itself at a seemingly random patch of sky. As it did, a lid on the box folded open, revealing a cluster of cylindrical objects, each sitting in its own cell.

And then at the precise moment ordered, six heavy missiles rippled

fired out of the orbital launcher that had been designated E3. Well, actually four did. The fifth one suffered a malfunction in its ignition system due to damage inflicted by the constant cycles of heating and freezing it had undergone while in orbit. Its solid fuel exploded all at once in its cell, taking itself, its launcher and the sixth missile in it.

But that left four missiles in flight and on target. And even as they flew, the other two orbital launchers were firing with carefully synchronized timing. Three missiles in A1 simply failed to launch. R1 managed to launch all six of its missiles, but the first one exploded when barely out of the box, debris from it wrecked the second missile as it flew through the debris cloud, but shielded the follow up missiles from further damage as they launched.

Dropship *Shadow's Wing* Inbound Earth Space

Colonel Sanders had been strapping into his *Warhammer* when the alarms started blaring and gravity began shifting wildly in strength and directions, a sure sign of evasive maneuvers. He hit the communications switch.

"Bridge, this is Sanders. What the hell is going on up there?" he demanded.

"Sorry, sir," came the reply. "The Motherloaders just launched what the threat computer is calling 'capital missiles' at us."

"What's a... never mind," Sanders said, cutting himself off. "Are they dangerous?"

"I'm not sure," the bridge officer reported. "They're bigger than missile has any right to be and... wait one. Sir, it looks like they're all targeted at the Band's Dropships. They're launching fighters and trying to pick off the missiles now with weapons now."

"Okay, I don't like this," Sanders said. "Get are own birds into space and..." Sanders orders were interrupted by the bridge officer's next words.

"Holy shit!"

Low Earth orbit Earth Space

Eleven missiles slashed in towards the Dropships of the Band of the Damned from three different directions. While their merely chemically powered thrusters were laughably weak by the standards of Star League era capital missiles, they still imparted better acceleration than what their targets were capable of. Of course, the price of that was limited endurance, which was why only three launchers were even close enough to fire.

The Band was not idle though. They took what evasive maneuvers they could, and fired their weapons in an effort to shoot down the missiles. But the problem was that they were busy decelerating towards the planet, which meant that their rears were pointed at the missiles coming towards them, and the rears had the weakest coverage of weapons.

Still, the missiles only had the most rudimentary evasion capability. One by one, they died, vaporized by laser fire. One missile was clipped by autocannon fire from the *Black Eye*. One shell clipped its tail, setting it spinning. The next shell neatly bisected the missile; both halves went spinning away towards the Band out of control.

Then everyone discovered what they were dealing with.

One fighter, a *Sholagar* that had managed to launch early, closed in eagerly on one surviving missile and got a bit too close. A proximity sensor in the missile picked up the aerospace fighter and set off its 300 kiloton W87 warhead in its face. The fighter and its pilot were completely vaporized. The flash from the explosion slagged sensors and burned away the majority of the armor from the closest Dropship, a *Union*, but it was far enough away to survive the experience... barely.

A second surviving missile got distracted, losing lock on the *Overlord* as another Dropship accidentally interposed itself. Falling back on

preprogrammed instructions, the missile locked onto the first thing it could see – the *Leopard* that had blocked its view in this case – and drove itself into the unlucky vessel. The *Leopard* was rapidly converted into an expanding cloud of plasma.

The third and last surviving missile actually overshot its target, zipping past the *Black Eye* before detonating in front of the Band of the Damned's flagship just out of instant lethality range. The huge Dropship was bathed in an intense flash of radiation that boiled away almost all of its armor instantly. In some spots, the armor was burned all the way through, and the atmosphere began to vent out uncontrollably.

The venting caused the *Black Eye* to start tumbling uncontrollably. The RCS thrusters that might have stopped the tumbling had been destroyed with much of the rest of the *Overlord's* upper surface. So when the Dropship hit atmosphere, air resistance grabbed at its many gaps and holes in an attempt to tear it to shreds.

Jumpship *Kip Branhagan* Earth-Moon L1 Point Earth Space

"...multiple *nuclear explosions!* Dear God in Heaven, what have we run into?" wailed the sensors officer.

Good question, Tasha thought grimly. In her mind, her duty became crystal clear. They had to return home and report this possible threat to her superiors. Anyone willing to throw around weapons of mass destruction was far too dangerous to be left alone. Only...

"How soon can we jump out?" Tasha asked, turning to the Captain.

"We can't," came the reply. "We hot charged are KF drive to jump this early. We're going to have to wait the full seven days before we can jump again or else we'll almost certainly suffer a misjump."

"All Dropships, this is Sanders!" the external communications speakers blared, interrupting their coversation. "Head planet side at best speed, and hope like hell that these guys won't set off nukes in

their own atmosphere."

"Fuck you, Sanders!" someone else replied. "I didn't sign up for this shit! I'm outta here!"

"Don't..."

Sanders didn't get to finish. On the holo plot, one of the Dropship icons peeled off from the rest of the descending icons. It slid sideways, skimming the edge of the atmosphere, then rising away in an obvious attempt to slingshot around the planet and get back to a Jumpship. Unfortunately, it ran into another wave of nuclear missiles that practically appeared right in its face.

Meanwhile, the surviving Dropships descended towards the planet, scattering randomly as evading nuclear death became their foremost priority.

"So we have to hang around here," Tasha said slowly, "in plain view with a planet that throws around nuclear weapons like popcorn?"

"Unfortunately, yes," the Captain said unhappily.

On the plot, the surviving Dropships descended towards the planet, scattering randomly in their search for loot and shelter from nuclear death.

Dropship *Black Eye* **Pacific Ocean** **Earth**

Burned, battered, torn, and nearly out of control, the massive Dropship hit the ocean surface hard, cushioned by the sporadically functioning fusion drive. The impact was the last straw, and the mass of metal collapsed in on itself even as it fell apart and sank into the ocean depths.

But even as it did, a large humanoid figure punched and clawed at its confines. A battered *Crusader* fought itself free of the entombing metal coffin and its pilot roared in triumph.

"Free!" roared Niles Black. "Free! I LIVE! And as I live, this world shall be damned as they come to know my wrath. I shall wreak my bloody revenge on...ye God, this pond is deep."

And with that, Colonel Niles Black followed his flag ship as they sunk straight into the Laurentian Abyss,

Dropship *Distant Home*

Inbound

Earth Space

"WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT!?" someone screamed.

Major Staedele, watching the footage on the outer camera, didn't answer. With his face rapidly becoming very pale, he watched the nuclear attack on the Band of the Damned, wondering just what the hell was going on. What kind of mad house situation had they all just walked into?

Luckily, there was still time.

"Hanna, get us into a stable, high orbit RIGHT NOW! I don't want us to get even a meter closer to that planet! GOD DAMNIT!", he yelled to his old aunt, the current captain of the dropship.

"So, what now, boss?", Lieutenant Marc Johnson, the CO of his infantry detail and highest ranking ground officer present besides him carefully asked. Johnson knew to be careful if the old man was in the kind of mood where he started cursing.

"That asshole Vorax was either lying through his teeth or didn't know shit. Motherload, my ass. More like "Deathtrap". Fuck it, the contract's off. I'm not going to risk our ship in a nuclear gauntlet, for god's sake! Okay... Calm down... Just let me think...."

It was then that the major had an epiphany.

"Prepare a message broadcast on an open frequency and make sure the people down there on the planet will get it."

"Sir?", one of the comms ratings asked.

"Just do it!"

"Okay, sir," the rating answered with an unsure voice, "Recording... now."

Staedele cleared his throat.

"This is Major Andreas Staedele of the mercenary unit Buron Cavalry, currently embarked on the Dropship *Distant Home*, to whoever down there hears this. Apparently, my employer hired me on a lot of false pretenses. As such, I consider my contract hereby to be null and void. I will not get any closer to your planet as long as I'm not being authorised to do so by local authorities with a guarantee that we will not be fired upon."

"On a sidenote, the Buron Cavalry is hereby free for hire and will take any job that doesn't require me to risk this dropship, which is incidentally carrying our dependents. *Distant Home*, over."

He signaled the tech to terminate the recording. The entire bridge looked at him as if he'd just lost his mind.

"What? As I said, I'm not going to risk all our lives running a nuclear gauntlet and this is the best chance to evade that, keep all our stuff, and perhaps even come out of this ahead," he angrily explained.

"So, send the damned message! Oh, and prepare one send to Sanders. Text: Fuck you, too, Sanders. I'm not going to get my people nuked. You're on your own. Staedele, out."

With that, Staedele settled down into one of the vacant chairs on the bridge, asking himself again in what kind of situation they'd just walked into. Damn the 21st Galedon Regulars!

USS Ohio
The Mid Pacific
Earth
14 November 2005.

The USS Ohio slowly cut under the ocean's surface. On board there was complete silence, not because of the threat of interception, but because of the deed they were about to do. For the first time in human history nuclear missiles were about to be fired in anger. It was a sobering fact, even if the target was the enemy of every man, woman, and child on Earth.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Captain James Brewer looked over to the man standing next to him. Captain-Lieutenant Ivan Ivanoff. If someone told him ten years ago that he'd be commanding a boomer, ready to launch his missiles at space invaders with a damned ruski holding the other key, he'd have thought they were drunk.

"Is strange situation we find ourselves in, no?" Ivan asked calmly.
"Mother Russia and the United States standing side by side as brothers protecting the Earth."

James smiled. "Yeah. It is." He took a sip of the harsh, black brew. "I find it appropriate though. You were a worthy enemy, but an even better ally."

The Russian laughed. "Muslims have saying. Me against my brother. My brother and I against family. Family and I against world. We are brothers, Russia and America, proud sons of Mother Earth."

"Captain," the Comms officer cut in. "We just received a message for PATCOM. Its time, sir."

Captain-Lieutenant Ivanoff smiled. "The world comes. Is time for battle."

Brewer simply nodded. "Bring us to launch depth and deploy uplink buoy."

"Aye, sir."

The boat shuddered slightly as it ascended to launch depth and there was an audible clunk as the uplink buoy was deployed. It made him wince. That alone was a mark of both their new priorities and the speed at which the system had been developed. Silence was no longer their primary concern. They could make it quiet later. Right now the main concern was simply having it.

"Sir, we're linked to the orbital defense network," Lt. Brown said from the new Fire Control computer.

"How many targets are within range?"

"Six, sir."

He nodded. Out of the 24 missiles carried on board the ship, twelve were test missiles and twelve carried live warheads. He'd have rather had the full 24 active warheads, but those test shots would still be good decoys. "Lock onto each target, two live missiles, two test missiles."

"Aye sir. We have targeting solutions."

Slowly he drew his key out from under his shirt and looked at his Russian counterpart who drew his and nodded.

Together they placed their keys into the firing computer. "Are you ready."

"Aye. Anything historic to say, comrade captain?"

"Yeah," he smiled. "On my signal, unleash hell.."

Ivan laughed. "Da. Was good movie."

With a shared, vicious smile they both turned their missile keys. The ship shuddered as 24 modified Trident missiles were cast into the sky.

"Withdraw the buoy and turn right full rudder. Bring us deep, and fast."

Secret Command Bunker
Washington DC, United States of America
Earth
14 November 2005

Deep with in the command bunker under the White House, President Jack Ryan listened to the somewhat frantic message from the Buron Cavalry "Well, isn't this convenient," President Ryan remarked absently.

"You're not seriously considering that offer," Secretary of State Scott Adler asked.

Jack simply smiled at him. "Scott, something I learned back in the CIA. When someone is looking to defect is that you don't question their motives and try to take advantage of it before they change their minds or someone else gets to them first. Someone get my a line to that ship. Now."

Moments later he found a radio receiver in front of him. While he normally hated the job, at moments like this he appreciated the perks.

"This Jack Ryan, President of the United States of America to Major Andreas Staedele. Your message has been received. I am going to have my people draw up the contract and transmit it as soon as possible. Until then remain in position. I am informing our military that your ship is not to be targeted as a hostile unless you take overt hostile action." He looked at the Joint Chiefs, nonverbally ordering them to pass it on. "Please transmit if you receive this message.

Over."

"This is Major Andreas Staedele. I've received your message and await contractual information."

Jack smiled and looked at the others. Letting go of the comm he took a deep breath. "Okay, what are you thinking?"

The Secretary of State frowned. "Personally, I don't like this."

"I'm not crazy about it either, but don't look a gift horse in the mouth," the President replied.

The Secretary of Defense frowned slightly. "We don't want to negotiate the entire contract right now. Just over pay them and tell them to consider it in part a retainer, and lets get those civilians off their ships. No salvage rights and we have full command rights," He paused for a moment and frowned. "I've been reading everything on Mercenary contracts I could find."

"Alright. I someone to work out a entry vector for them," Jack replied. "Something limited."

The Airforce representative nodded. "I'll work it out with my people. How about we direct them to Andrews?"

Jack nodded. "This is President Ryan to Major Staedele. Our offer is as follows. You will surrender command rights to our personal and we do not offer you salvage rights. You will land at Andrews Airforce Base on a vector to be transmitted shortly. Any deviation from that vector will be seen as a hostile action and you will be fired upon. Once you arrive you will unload your dependents, who I give you my

word will not be harassed nor harmed in any way. We are not asking for hostages, we simply want to keep your families out of a war zone. Afterwards you will deploy into action as directed for the duration of this conflict. Payment will be five hundred kilograms of gold bullion. This also serves as a retainer for future employment. Over."

"This is Major Staedele. I would like to confirm. Five *hundred* kilograms of gold?"

"Affirmative."

"You have yourself a lance. Please transmit the vector. Over."

Dropship *Distant Home*
Conference Room
Inbound
Earth Space
November 15th 2005/3020

Staedele watched the officer contingent of the Buron Cav as they sat around the table or stood at the walls in the Conference Room/Mess Hall/Casino of the *Distant Home*. Most of them were looking just as uncomfortable as he was feeling.

"So, people, you all heard what that 'President Ryan' offered us. Anyone got a comment?"

"If I'm not mistaken, boss, the guy promised us half a TON of gold. Just how much is that anyway?" Christine Miller, the youngest MechWarrior of the unit, asked. "I'm not really up to date on that kind of thing."

"Well, Chris," the major's wife and head tech, Marie Staedele, answered, "going by the last rates I saw back on Port Krin... about 17.6 million C-Bills, give or take."

This sent an almost visible ripple throughout the room as anyone realised with just what kind of sum they were dealing here. One could almost hear the cash registers behind everyone's eyes ring. That'd *really* put them back into the black numbers.

"That'd be enough to get us over our little cash problems and then some." Nedeljko mused.

"Wait a second," Tom Lemell, the 4th MechWarrior of the Cav, remarked, "how the hell could they even afford that kind of sum? And then blow it on hiring a single lance and some PBI, no offense, Johnson. I don't trust this. That's gotta be a trick."

"None taken, Tom." The infantry commander of the Cav answered. "As to how they can afford that: I'd say they dug it out of their own soil. I say we shouldn't see that planet as some kinda Periphery

shithole. After all, how many of those can afford to mass produce freakin' nukes?"

"It's not as if we'd have any choice to begin with." Hanna remarked. "It'll take the jump fleet almost a week to recharge the drives and till then, I expect those nice people down there to have captured themselves a good number of DropShips. And given how they're popping nukes as if they were cheap fireworks, I daresay they wouldn't really show any restraint when it comes to blowing up the JumpShips. Whoever these guys are, they certainly never signed the Ares Conventions."

This caused everyone in the room to wince. The sheer thought about the implications of *that* made for one nasty image.

"So, there we have it, people." Staedele continued. "Our choice is pretty much down to this:

A: Following all the other retards and invade anyway, something which I'll not do as the lives of everyone on board of this ship are worth more to me than anyone could ever pay me. B: Wait out here and get boarded and all our stuff seized once the guys come up with their newly aquired DropShips. Or C: Taking their offer and trusting them to not fuck us over. If they lied, we'll still be down there, were they just might not want to begin throwing WMDs, which makes that a way better place than any geostationry orbit in my book.

So, I'm now asking you. What option we should take? Note that I'll still be the one to finally decide it, but I want to know what your opinion is. So, vote away."

Unsurprisingly, the vote was unanimous.

"Okay, then it's decided, people. Inform the dependents. Tell them to pack up their stuff and that they'll be likely relocated to an installation on-planet. Marie, I want the Mechs combat ready for a quick start yesterday. Ned, Chris, Tom: Ready room. Marc, you'll post the infantry company inside the ship. Full equipment. In case they DO fuck us over, I want them to bleed for every single step they take into OUR ship.. Let's get this rolling, people, " Staedele declared.

Which left him, on his way to the ready room, to brood. He was sure he missed some detail in that short conversation with President Ryan. He just couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Bridge
Dropship Drakon
On Approach
Earth Space
14 November, 3020

"We're all gonna die!" Captain Mamoto cried out as another flash of light illuminated the bridge through the cockpit glass.

"Shut up! Just shut the fuck up!" Jane screamed at the top of her lungs. "You're not helping!"

"Nukes!" He exclaimed. "Nobody said they had nukes!"

"Well we didn't ask," Jane replied sarcastically.

"Shut up, both of you," Lieutenant Koltan cursed from the side of the bridge. He'd originally come up to see what the hell was going on. They were flying like they had a drunken pilot and it was making all the Dark Wings dependents freak out, and as highest ranking combat officer on this boat he'd been the one elected to go to the bridge. Of course he'd just had to walk into a madhouse. Jane was pissed, the idiot captain was freaking out, and oh yeah, the Motherloaders were firing enough nuclear weapons at them to fight the Second Succession War.

"If you two can't keep cool heads, we're all doomed," he growled, "Now someone tell those gunners to shoot anything even vaguely missile like that heads towards our god damned ship."

"Thank you," Jane said with a sigh.

Mamoto glared at him, and taking a deep breath "Excuse me, but I am the captain. I give the orders. Order the gunnery crew to destroy any more nukes that are fired at our ship. That should keep us nice and safe."

"Sir, we're picking up launches from the middle of the planet's largest ocean," the sensor rating cut in. "They ID as 'Capitol Missiles'."

"Middle of the ocean?" Mamoto wondered, "How's that possible, and what's a capitol missile."

Jane paled slightly. "Missile Submarines, and Capitol Missiles are another piece of lostech. Missiles the size of ASFs designed to blow up warships. Even if those things aren't nuclear, they'll crack a dropship open like an egg, and considering what we've seen so far, they're probably nuclear."

"Don't be silly. After what we've seen so far, I doubt they even have any left. After all, how many nuclear weapons can one planet have?" he snorted.

"Sir!" the same rating exclaimed. "We have a detonation, 100 kilotons! Oh shit! Four of them are on an intercept vector! Impact in 60 seconds!"

"SHOOT THEM DOWN!" SHOOT THEM DOWN!"

Jane glanced over to Irdon and muttered, "He just had to open his big mouth, didn't he?"

The Drakon rumbled as the ship's weapons fired their full fury against the incoming missiles.

"One down!" The weapons officer announced to a cheer from the captain. "Make that two."

"Oh shit! Ten seconds!" The sensor officer announced "Nine! Eight!"

The captain began to scream at the top of his lungs, grasping the rests of his chair hard enough to actually cause the metal to creak.

"Seven! Six!" the sensor frantically cried out.

Taking a deep breath, Jane grabbed Irdon and kissed him on the lips. "I love you."

"Five! Four!"

A bit taken back he could only smile. When you only have a couple seconds left to life, make them count. "I love you too. Marry me."

"Three! Two!"

"Yes."

"One! Oh shit!"

A furious clang resounded throughout the ship, and the impact knocked them all back. Both Jane and Koltan, who hadn't been restrained, were thrown against a bulkhead, knocking the wind out of them.

"What the hell was that?!" Jane demanded.

"It was a dud, ma'am! The other seems to have failed to obtain terminal guidance! Nose armor's down by 45%, but we're alive! Hahaha! We're alive!" He paused and laughed again. "By the way, congrats about the wedding, ma'am!"

Both officers looked at each other and blushed furiously. They hadn't exactly said that while expecting to live. Still, looking as they looked at each other, they couldn't find any complaints.

Their awkward silence was interrupted by Koltan sniffing the air. "Do you smell that?"

Jane blinked. "Smell? Yeah, it smells like..."

Both eyes turned to the captain who was sitting completely still with a catatonic, glassy eyed look on his face. The legs of his pants were wet.

"Oh you've got to be fucking kidding me."

"Um, Ma'am, we're getting a message from the surface. Its Captain Hale!"

The view from Hawaii was quite spectacular three large fireballs were moving over the sky over the islands. The fireballs were accompanied by white ribbons coming from the water around the islands.

USS Bunker Hill

The Captain of the USS Bunker Hill stood on the Bridge, listening to his XO call out, "We can see the whites of their eyes sir!"

Calmly the Captain gave the order, "You may fire when ready Mr Gage." Then he turned to watch a sight he never expected to see outside of WWII against the Soviets.

Young sailors on the bridge gapped at a 'magnum launch' of SM-2S SAMs. In the preceding months the VLS loadout had been changed so over half of them now had the new antiarmor warhead Standards. In the early dawn light over 80 missiles sprang skyward, their launching a near solid wall of sound and fire. In the oceans around them they could see more missile tracks from the other ships that happened to be at Pearl this day join the Bunker Hill's. The destroyers O'Kane and the frigate Reuben James also unloaded into the descending dropships.

Turning back to the radar display he watched as his missiles tracked in on one of the three lighter 'Dropships', tagged as Leopard Three. Time sharing would normally drag down the hit percentages, but the targets dropping from orbit were both so large, nearly the size of a Perry Frigate, and so obvious to thermal and radar that it nearly didn't matter.

The Captain hid a wince as he watched as his entire salvo of Standards merge with the target, Aegis estimating over 80 impacts, several tons of the best military explosives in the Navy's possession this side of nuclear warheads, for no apparent effect. The remaining salvo from the other 2 ships were divided between the Leo 1 and Leo2 each taking 70% and 30% respectively. "What the hell does it take to put those bastard down?!" was one radar rating's complaint, who was quickly taken in hand by a CPO for the outburst. Not too

unkindly the Captain noted, they just fired off enough missiles to take a huge bite out of the Soviet Air Force back during it's Cold War height, and utterly annihilate 80% of the airforces on the planet. "Comm, signal to CINC Third Fleet, "Swordsman expended all ordnance, target still effective.""

Bridge
Dropship Firejaw
Over ???? Ocean.
Motherload
Day Month 3020?

'Fuck Fuck Fuck what the fuck is going on'. Thought captain James Brand of the Merc cum pirate ban Fire Brand as the ship rumble with the sounds of missile hits. Though he didn't say it out loud, the crew looked nervous enough as it is.

After the Black Eye got hit with the nuke nobody stayed in orbit to find out what was going on. Everybody made a break for the surface.

'Well everybody who was smart anyway.' He grimaced to himself as the sensors fuzzed up again indicating another nuclear detonation and fiery death of the stragglers who didn't have captains as quick on their feet as him. Those poor sods who stayed in orbit were coming down whether they like it or not. In their case it was in burning radioactive pieces instead of a controlled descent like him.

Well some what controlled as a shock ran through the ship.

"I think we lost more armor on the port side sir" said one of the crewmen monitoring the ship. The rear camera showed an 8x3m section of hull bent into an L tumbling behind the ship, narrowly missing the other Leopards that were following his lead.

'Which shouldn't have happened at all.' He thought. When a dropper enters atmosphere it should have been safe, nothing could hit it when it was entering the atmosphere. 'But nobody told these Motherloaders that did they?'

As they were entering the atmosphere over the largest ocean on this planet the immediately came under attack from dozens of missiles. The missiles seemed to be coming from the middle of the ocean. There must be ships there but he couldn't see it between and EMP and the heat from entry.

"That loss was a good thing" responded the young woman in the piloting consol. "The hits there from before deformed the armor there so the wind was peeling it back and it was acting like an air brake. I had to compensate manually."

Another problem getting hits as his ships did. The force of the air resistance was quite incredible at the speed they were traveling at. The damaged deformed armor was exacerbating the damage from the missiles, which weren't that large. The hits had loosen the armor and the bits that became warped became caught in the wind and were slowly prying and bending more armor out which made the problem even worse.

"Good work Emily." He had to give credit where it was due he hardly felt a wobble. Emily Hastings was new to the company but dammed if she wasn't a fine pilot. Young and a bit over excited but instincts like she was born with wings. She couldn't see the shape or side of the bent hull section so she had to do it by feel. Brand couldn't recall any pilot in his long career who could have done that.

"Scopes look clear Captain I think we're out of their range" said crewman Hayes in the sensor station. "Or they ran out of missiles" he added.

That wasn't hard to believe they must have used over a hundred missiles on the 3 Leos on the way down. He hoped it was the latter that meant he wouldn't have to run the gauntlet getting back in orbit.

Finally with some respite Brand could afford to take a look at the state of the other 2 dropships that came with him. His other Leo the Firefist looked to be in better shape it took the least damage being in the middle. The 3rd Leo on the end however didn't look to be doing too well. It had gotten hit by the most missiles and was wobbling a

great deal and he could see fuel streaming out in several spots. It wasn't one of his, in the mad scramble to get down that ship just took his lead and tagged along. Brand was very grateful for that now since it gave those missile ships more targets to shoot at, targets that didn't belong to him.

Brand took a look at his destination, it was under consideration as a potential big haul but now it was the only choice open to them considering their course and the fact that a Union was almost there. He didn't care about splitting the loot right now he just wanted to survive and the Union should be a lot of help if there are more threats around. And it should have absorbed any of the missiles on the way down and ignored it unlike his relatively thin skinned Leopards.

"This is Firejaw calling Blood Hammer" Brand began. It was one of the true pirate band not like his out of work merc. band. "What the situation on the ground there?"

"Pretty sweet there's this nice spot right near a bunch of containers that should fit all of us. Though we got dibs we're getting priority on the loot"

Damn pirates always thinking about the loot never about little things, like how we're supposed get off this fucking rock if there were more nukes in orbit. Which he was willing to put good money there was.

"We're sending you the co-ordinates now—" just as he finished a loud boom reverberated through the com. "What the fuck hit—" then the com went dead.

"Maybe it hit his antenna?" Emily offered.

Brand wasn't that much of an optimist. But he had no choice. He was heading trait for the big city the Western shore of the continent. To change course now would be extremely difficult and he didn't know where most of the other were landing. And it was better to have someone there to pave the way. He was some what confident/hopeful that the Union would attract most of the fire.

As they approached the location indicated they could see the Union had put down it was an island in the middle of a port facility. 'Looks defensible' Brand thought.

As they made the final approach and slowed down and diverted some of the thrust to lift the ship more missile warnings came.

"Get us on the ground now!!"

The radar, now with a clear reading, saw eight missiles coming straight for his ships. Whatever they were they were big if they showed up on the scopes like that.

Then he saw the last ship in the formation—the tagalong, he didn't even know its name—get engulfed in at least 5 big explosions. The already damaged ship couldn't take it and its engine failed and it plummeted toward the waters below. Then it was his ships' turn. 2 missiles hit the Firefist on its port side but it kept going with some wobble. Then a monstrous boom rocked the Firejaw, but thankfully only one. The monitor indicated the hit was in a spot that was unscathed from the entry. Still quite a bit of armor was removed from the area, and his teeth were still jangling. Then they were skidding on solid ground about a mile from the Union, which had landed on the east end of the island.

He managed to breathe a sigh of relief. At least they were on the ground now and no longer in danger of crashing into it at high speeds.

He called down to the hanger and the Firefist. "Get the mechs out and secure a perimeter not telling what other surprises they didn't tell us about."

"Good job Emily that was some of the finest piloting I've ever seen." She beamed at that which made her look even younger than the dubious 20 she had indicated upon signup. No matter isn't my business. He signed. As long as you did what was asked of you the Fire Brand didn't care what you were.

"Get to the hanger and get your Seydlitz in the air as soon as possible.

I want a recon of the area" Brand told Hastings. "Does the Hammer have any ASFs? A joint recon with some multiple birds might be safer"

"No captain I kept track of the ASFs in the fleet the Hammer wasn't one of those carrying" Hastings answered. 'Of course she would be the one to go out of her way to keep track of the fighters in the fleet.' Brand nodded knowingly.

"Alright get out there, and be careful." He waved her away.

Normally her place would have been in the fighter, already launched to cover and scout for the dropships as they descended. But the Firejaw's normal pilot was bowed over the toilet puking his guts out so she filled in his place. On most ships there would've been a copilot to take over but the Fire Brands were too undermanned to have even that and until Hastings came along they operated with 2 qualified pilots between the 2 ships.

USS Port Royal
Between San Diego and LA

"Sir the harpoons are being reloaded right now. We should have all 8 ready to launch within the hour" said the chief petty officer.

"Very good, thank you chief, let me know when they are" said Captain Reed. "Radar, any more inbound?"

"No sir the scopes look clear sir." Responded the crewman.

"Not like we're in a position to do anything about it if there were." Said the XO. "We spent almost 200 SMs from 4 ships for no noticeable damage to that giant billiard ball. It took all 8 Harpoons to make it hurt and it still managed to get on the ground in tact."

"But it's going to stay there. Orders are for us to plaster all drop ships with Tomahawks if any shows signs of powering up" responded the captain. "And Princeton managed to nail one of the smaller ones. How is that Leopard they shot down by the way?"

"Still floating. Decatur and Boxer are heading toward it now. Navy and Marine hornets with BGU-15s and harpoons are covering it."

"Good" a destroyer and an assault ship full of marines should make short work of any survivors.

"Sir! We have a contact rising from the one of the smaller dropships." Called out a crewman.

"What kind of contact?"

"Small one looks to be the size of a fighter. It's climbing fast." Target it with the remaining Standards. Standby to fire." Reed called out.

"Hold, I have CINC on the line" said the XO. "They want to see how our fighters fare against theirs, F-14s and 18s from Miramar and Nimitz are inbound. We are to hit save our Standards for any additional targets that emerge"

Reed knew the look on the XO's face, he had the same look. Those pilots were going to be guinea pigs.

Edit: Fixed a few spelling and bit of polishing

Lion-class DropShip Hammer of the Gods
Inbound from "Motherlode" orbit
15 November 3020/2005

{"-itohshitohshitohshitohJesuswe'refuckedwe'rejust -"}

"Hudson, will you shut the fuck up!?" Being wrapped in sixty-five tons of fusion-powered battle-steel was normally enough to make "Chief" Nigel Murray feel nigh-invincible... but now the cockpit of his CRD-3L felt more like a mobile metal tomb. *Who the hell are these people? Nobody's thrown around this many nukes since the Second Succession War!* He keyed the intercomm. link, wishing he didn't sound quite as close to raw panic as he knew he did. "Ilya, when will we be clear of re-entry blackout? We need to know where we're going to land!"

{"Blackout over in three... two... one... we're clear now, Chief!"} his pilot replied from the bridge, several decks above the 'Mech and vehicle bays holding the self-proclaimed "Rain of Pain". {"Plotting descent track against planetary geography... oh, frackencrack."}

I know that tone, but really: how much worse can this day get?
Grimacing in aggravation, Murray flipped the settings on a secondary monitor to clone the master geo-plot being run on the bridge. Their projected descent track put them... "Oh, bloody hell."

{"Uh... Chief, we're getting a signal from our projected LZ - I'm piping it down to you."}

{"- say again, this is Colonel James Locklear of the New Zealand Defence Force to incoming *Lion-class DropShip*: if you surrender your forces and land peacefully at the coordinates we designate, your personnel will not be harmed and your equipment will not be blasted to scrap-metal. Of course, it's your prerogative to be total idiots about this, but if you fire even one shot at us, you need to understand something:

{"We owe you miserable inbred cocksucking sons-of-bitches **ALL THE HURT IN THE FUCKING WORLD.**"}

Murray's head drooped. *Note to self: stop taunting Murphy.*

After a long moment, Murray shook himself and keyed the all-hands circuit. "Ilya, we're all listening. Did you get a good look at those nuke launchers?"

{"... Yeah, I did. Now that I know what to look for, I can spot 'em from the ground."} The *I hope!* went unsaid.

"Good. Listen up, everybody: this is now a straight-up raid-and-out. Ilya, find a flat spot inside the city, somewhere close to a lot of valuable or highly-populated real-estate, and set the *Hammer* down on it - hopefully these people aren't crazy enough to nuke their own civvies to get at us. All our 'Mechs will hot-drop in from three thousand metres up; our job will be to break trail for the *Hammer*. Everyone else, establish a perimeter around the DropShip and don't let anyone through to it. When the militia shows up, chew hell out of 'em, make 'em too afraid to come near us before Ilya can plot us an escape vector that won't get us vapourised. Tanks and infantry will protect the DropShip; 'Mechs, keep mobile, break up anything that looks like a coherent strike-force. Gerhardt, we're going to need the Beagle Probe on that *Cyrano* of yours to help us spot militia squishies trying to infiltrate towards the *Hammer*, so get airborne as soon as you can."

Waiouru, New Zealand ***That same time***

They'd been mobilised as soon as NORAD passed the word of the pirates' arrival in-system to the GDI states, and now everything was as ready as it was going to get: the vehicles had been mechanically checked over (and the few 'bent' ones fixed with frantic haste), armed, and fuelled; the infantry had been issued live ammunition, with extra LAWs for the rifle-teams and doubled ammo-allocations for the heavy-weapons crews; their most important weapons, the all-

important laser-designators (delivered from the US barely two months beforehand), had been calibrated and prepared with excruciating care.

Now, 1st Battalion RNZIR, the only mechanised battalion in the New Zealand Army, could do nothing but the hardest part of soldiering: wait and wonder if, when, and where they'd be dispatched, and what would await them when they got there.

It was a bleak, jittery sort of wait, made even worse by looking up into the bright blue late-spring sky to see the flash-bulb spots of nuclear detonations among the oncoming invaders. The troops traded the usual pre-battle banter and jokes, every man trying to ignore the oppressive tension hanging in the air and avoid pondering his own mortality, with non-coms and officers occasionally delivering pep-talks. Those did some good... but they weren't sparkling successes, either. The simple truth was, every trooper of First Battalion knew that even with the aid-packages they'd received in the last few months, the New Zealand Army was set up mainly for peacekeeping and jungle-warfare duties; what they now faced was the worst kind of fight that could come to a Kiwi force. The New Zealand Army had operated no tanks since retiring its handful of light-scouts in the early '90s; it had only towed 105mm field-guns, and too few of them for these purposes; its heaviest anti-armour weapons were Javelins, backed by man-portable Carl Gustav recoilless rifles and the 25mm chain-guns on the battalion's LAV-IIIs - and none of them would make much impression on the armour used by BattleMechs and their contemporaries.

Nonetheless, Lieutenant-Colonel Martin Te Huki virtually teleported across his office to snatch up his telephone before it rang a second time. "First Battalion, Te Huki speaking."

{"Colonel, they're trying to get on the ground before the orbital defences can hit them with more nukes."} The Chief of Defence Force was an Air Force man, but like Te Huki, he was in no mood to mince words. {"They've scattered all over the show, but there's a single DropShip headed our way and it hasn't answered our challenge. The experts say it looks like a *Lion*-class, so they're anticipating a combined-arms force: as many as eight BattleMechs and a dozen light

vehicles, probably with infantry support. Their current descent-track puts them somewhere in the North Island - wait a second."} A few moments' muffled conversation. {"NORAD's updated the plot - the cheeky bastards are headed into Auckland again! Their communications might be out, Colonel, but I'm not about to bet on it: your battalion will move north immediately. If these people prove hostile, you will engage the enemy at first opportunity. Make every effort to prevent civilian casualties and damage to property, but lives are more important than concrete. Understood?"}

"Yes, sir!"

And as he went about his duties, Te Huki tried not to think about the mess that many 'Mechs and tanks would inevitably make of his command... much less the citizens and poor-bastard police and Territorials who'd run into them first.

I just hope the bloody Air Force comes to the party, or a lot of people on the ground are going to die for nothing.

Northbound from Ohakea, New Zealand That same time

Twelve JAS-39Cs and a pair of two-seat JAS-39D trainers were burning towards Auckland, all of them heavily armed, all of them crewed by hard-eyed men with fell intent.

James Garvey had been awarded the NZMC for his flight's role in the First Battle of Auckland... not that it had rebuilt any of the wrecked buildings, resurrected a single dead civvie, or been much consolation to Pete Frasier's widow. Fortunately, the unprepossessing 'expert' who'd shown up to brief them about BattleTech in the aftermath had been fairly switched-on for a self-admitted geek, and he'd actually offered some useful suggestions - including the one that had led to the squadron's current weapons-mix. *If Mister Blackbeard thinks he can just wave 'g'day!' as he flies up-up-and-away this time around, he's in for a rude bloody shock even before he runs back into the nukes!*

Hammer of the Gods ***Over Manukau Harbour, New Zealand***

{"Looks like there's some air-breathing fighters coming up from the south, Chief - must be the same base that hit Mamoto, but there must be a dozen of 'em this time; looks like these people build planes fast. Descending through four thousand metres, opening bay doors,"} Ilya recited over the intercomm. Sure enough, a moment later the drop-door before Murray's *Crusader* swung open.

{"Holy shit - it's that wet-ship Mamoto ran into!"} someone else on the bridge screeched.

{"Then sink it, Goddammit!"} a third man snarled.

Hammer's turret-crews would have been flung out of any Successor House gunnery school for their slovenly habits alone, and they were certainly members of the 'spray and pray' school of marksmanship, but they were shooting almost straight down at their target. Of *Hammer's* aft-facing batteries, only the LRM-racks and laser-cannons had the range, and they all cut loose in the space of three seconds. The missiles scattered all around the target, many striking the water and raising nothing more dangerous than spouts of water and sprays of shrapnel; the target's AMS shot down some of the others; the remainder scattered across her upperworks, shredding metal, exposed personnel, and all manner of electronics.

And there was no stopping the lasers.

Four beams hit the frigate. Two speared into its midsection, punching through thin steel to rupture and ignite the bunkers of fuel-oil that fired its boilers. The other pair lanced down through the top of the boxy turret on the foredeck, killing two crewmen in passing, then punched deeper into the turret's bowels and touched off the magazines that fed its twin-114mm guns.

HMNZS *Canterbury* exploded with her full crew of two hundred and forty-five souls aboard.

There were no survivors.

Over the Waikato Valley ***That same time***

Garvey's face tightened as *Canterbury's* GCI chatter cut off in a mid-word screech of static. The sudden roil of smoke was little more than a black dot at this range, but it didn't take Pythagoras to do that bit of maths. "Right. Now we'll bloody have you, mate!" he growled into his oxygen-mask, before keying his radio. "Inbounds are hostile, say again hostile. Theseus flight, with me: weapons hot, switch Mistletoe. All others hold here."

{"Two."} {"Three."} {"Four."}

It was the work of instants for each of the Gryphons to get a hard radar-lock on their target: even without an IFF transponder-code, it's rather hard to overlook a metal spheroid ninety metres in diameter. Garvey waited a half-instant for a good tone, then called, "Theseus Lead: Fox One! Fox One!" and thumbed the pickle twice.

One of the most galling aspects of the last raid had been watching *Drakon* climb skyward, too fast for anyone to get a shot with a Sidewinder and completely outside the reach of their laser-guided gravity-bombs. When that point had come up in the weeks immediately afterward, 'Trace Coburn' had almost innocently mused aloud that Swedish JAS-39s had used to carry the Sky Flash missile (a British derivative of the old AIM-7 Sparrow), and since the Poms and Swedes were retiring Sky Flash in favour of AMRAAMs, they might be willing to spare some for experimentation and modification. That had been kicked up the chain to Raytheon and British Aerospace... who had collectively smacked themselves on the forehead, set up a joint working-group, and turned out a workable (if not overly pretty) design for a field-modification kit in only nineteen days, counting the successful test-firing that had capstoned the process.

By replacing the missile's original continuous-rod warhead with a

shaped-charge, and modifying the guidance/fusing package to promote contact-detonation, they could turn Sparrows, Sea Sparrows, and Sky Flashes into weapons that could (at least notionally) cause effective damage to BT-armoured aerial targets - and virtually every modern fighter in the world built by a NATO nation (apart from Russia) could carry some version of the AIM-7. The working-group had dubbed the resulting weapon 'Mistletoe', in honour of an incident from Norse mythology, and Raytheon and British Aerospace were still working around the clock to build all the kits needed to field-convert Sparrow-based missiles their customers already had in their stocks. (They'd even been charitable enough to sell the refit-kit specs to the Italian firm Selenia, who produced their own version of the Sparrow known as the Aspide for air- and surface-to-air duties, for a price that wasn't overly greedy. Negotiations to do the same for companies in the recently liberalised PRC, which operated a knock-off of the Aspide, were scheduled for - d'oh! - early December.)

There had been an unanticipated bonus in the arrangement for the Kiwis: since the RAF was sticking with its AMRAAMs, BAe was remanufacturing the 'obsolescent' Sky Flashes for foreign customers... like the Kiwis who'd had the original idea. Sixty Mistletoes had arrived in New Zealand barely six weeks ago; now, eight of them dropped from beneath the wings of Theseus Flight's Gryphons and scorched across the November sky at four times the speed of sound.

The First Battle of Auckland had demonstrated that 'Motherlode's' weapons could damage or destroy BattleMechs under the right circumstances; neither Mamoto nor *Drakon* had seen how far Motherloder weapons could reach, so being shot at from a range of more than fifty kilometres at such low altitude gobsmacked *Hammer's* sensor-operator for a moment. It might not have mattered anyway.

Of the eight Mistletoes launched at the DropShip, one 'went stupid' before it reached the halfway mark, a result of hasty work in the seeker-head refit; two others failed to fuse properly and simply crumpled against *Hammer's* thickly armoured hull, adding only more scratches and dents to its already battered appearance. Four more detonated as designed, but blasted only minor craters into armour

that could withstand 'alpha-strikes' from entire assault lances.

The eighth Mistletoe, Theseus Three's second shot, caught Conchita Torres' STG-3R *Stinger* just as it fired its jump-jets and exited the 'Mech-bay's 'B' drop-door, detonating against the side of its boxy head and rattling the Taurian-born pirate about its cramped cockpit like a light-bulb in a washing-machine. Knocked senseless by the blast battering her against her own instrument-panels, Torres lost track of her descent-attitude - one of the worst things a 'Mech-pilot can do during a hot-drop.

Torres was still trying to figure out which way was up when her *Stinger*, its jump-jets still blazing at full thrust, speared itself head-first into the rocky foreshore of the Waimanu Bay section of Waitemata Harbour.

I haven't even set foot on it yet, but I think I really could come to dislike this planet, the whimsical part of Nigel Murray judged, watching Torres' 'Mech redistribute itself between land and sea. Neither the reactor nor the ammo-storage blew, surprisingly enough, so some parts might be retrievable - but parts were about all he'd get out of the wreck.

The unit-commander part of him was screaming into his radio headset. "Abort drop! Abort drop! Everyone stay inside until we've landed! Ilya, close the doors and get us on the ground NOW!"

Great Mosque
Mecca, Saudi Arabia
Earth
14 November, 2005

The King of Saudi Arabia silently looked over the pavilion that surrounded the Kaaba. Today more faithful were assembled here than any time he'd ever seen outside the Hajj. When it had been announced that the infidel invaders had come to assault the Earth he'd called out to the faithful to jihad against the invader. Those who could fight were assembling into bands of Mujahideen. Those who could not were praying for the souls and safety of their protectors, both faithful and infidel.

He smiled. The foolish pirates would find that the forces of the faithful were a force that could not be overcome.

His musing was interrupted by a distant rumbling. What was that sound?

Frowning slightly he turned to his personal bodyguard who was standing at attention.

"Do you hear that?"

"Yes, my king," replied his dutiful guard.

The door to the room suddenly exploded open and inside ran several of his guards. "My king, we must flee! The pirates are coming! Mecca will soon fall under assault!"

The king growled in anger as he leapt to his feet. "They dare!"

First the damned Iranians and now invaders from another world. Saudi Arabia was the center of civilization, the home of God. Despite his anger the king followed his men to a waiting helicopter and quickly boarded. They needed to get out of the city before the enemy deployed their forces.

As the chopper lifted off he saw the ball shaped craft sitting several kilometers in the distance. Damn them to the depths of...

Dropship *Pillager*

City in the Middle of a Desert.

Motherload

14 November, 3020

The captain of the *Pillager* laughed darkly as the civilian VTOL exploded brilliantly from a PPC blast, dead center. Most of the drop ships seemed to be attacking the wealthy nation state on the smaller of the northern continents. Over the signals they'd been able to detect, heard that his desert area was exceedingly rich in petrochemicals and had meek, quiet women who knew their place. Perfect fodder for the slave markets of Port Krin.

He nodded to his second and command, and with rough precision the units 'Mechs deployed followed by infantry. The 'Mechs were Port Krin regular forces, minor city state nobles looking to carve out their own fiefs. Mostly light 'Mechs with a few mediums in their number, they were a rag tag force, but good enough to defeat some piss ant periphery militia.

Minutes later the infantry swarmed out in a hoard. Hoard was the best name for them. They consisted of mostly bandits and thugs looking for loot and pillage. Well, there was an entire city in front of them. Enjoy your pay, boys.

Cascade Range, Oregon
15 November 2005/3020

"Sergeant, they're here earlier than expected, and in far more strength than we'd hoped. Our local air wing launched too soon and got chewed up, and their main concentrations need everything we can throw at them if we're going to have any chance. We need you to keep their mind off of terrorizing the civilians, or linking up with one of the larger forces. If possible work to deplete their fighter and anti-air assets, but not at the cost of getting pinned down"

"Control, I'll do my best, but Quasi wasn't built for speed, just about everything they have is going to be at least as fast as me. Is it too late to fly Jankowski over to pilot? I can always stay in the cockpit in case he gets squirrely."

"Sergeant, we just put Jankowski in the Commando and sent him out to another hot spot. It's *that* bad. We'll get reinforcements to you as soon as possible, but we just can't spare the planes from the two largest theaters that we'd need to accomplish anything. You're the only thing we have that might convince them to stick around where they can't do too much damage."

"Enemy forces? Allied support?"

"Two light aerospace fighters, tentatively classed as Sabres, and at least half a dozen mechs, one of which was definitely a Rifleman. No support at this time, your ground crew has another tasking."

"Roger control, out. Just don't expect much to be left of me when they get here" Dandel muttered after breaking the connection. *Let's see, on the plus side, I have the supplementary weapons, and they haven't seen me yet. On the minus side, well, everything else really.* The 'supplementary weapons' were really just a pair of clubs sized for the Hunchback, formed from high-density metals and donated as part of a set of like melee weapons by a wealthy enthusiast. These two had held up the best under testing, and it had been intended that today would be a test of the strain of a long term deployment while

carrying them, to develop a better feel for how much stress a mech's muscle and bones could undergo beyond the official specifications. It was also intended that the Earth would keep its one undamaged Battlemech completely out of the likely combat zones, with the usual results when plans and reality come into conflict.

Sergeant Dansel set his mech into motion, eating up the ground at a steady lope as he drove towards the Dropship's landing site. Unfortunately, despite all of the immense practical, and in some cases still inexplicable advantages offered by Battlemech technology, there was one thing that they tended to be dismally inept at. And one of the fighter pilots picked exactly the wrong moment to gain a few hundred meters of altitude, bringing the towering height of the *Hunchback* clearly into view of its sensors just as Dansel crested a hill, moments before he could enter a treeline. Instantly, the two fighters changed course towards his position.

Pilot Officer Gentry Yates had been bored almost since they'd landed. Sure, there had been a minute of excitement when those primitive planes had come off the ground as the dropship was landing, but she and her partner had easily seen them off. *Well the crossfire from the dropship and Major Bordan's Rifleman might have helped a little, but I'm not going to tell him that.* However, a medium mech, much less one with the sheer punch of a Hunchback wasn't what she was looking for in a mood enhancer, especially when she didn't have a damned thing that outraged it.

Her radio crackled to life as her wingman, who she only knew as Rake, piped up "Lead, didn't the guy in charge of the mechs that got ambushed drive a Hunchback?"

"That's what I heard. I also heard the wogs here managed to get there hands on it mostly in one piece. Let's do a quick flyby right inside its range, these people might be dumb primitives, but there's no need to take chances."

"Copy lead." The two fighters skirted just within what was generally considered the range an infighter might have a shot at hitting something, ready at a moment's notice to dodge if the mech made a

move. It didn't even twitch, as it continued to stagger along towards their ride home.

"Right then, Rake, circle around and catch it from it's left low and fast on my signal, we'll pincer this son of a bitch so he won't know which way to turn even if he sees us coming. Base, we've got ourselves a gate crasher, taking a run at it in three" With that, the two fighters broke for the deck, the one taking up a holding pattern, as the other circled around at barely subsonic speeds for a position some thirty clicks away. "Start your run" she said, as she slammed forward at supersonic speed.

The two fighters closed rapidly, homing on the magnetic signature of the mech until they could get a clear view. The contact kept its unsteady pace, slowly moving along, until the fighters came into clear view. At that moment, its torso smoothly twisted to the left, and a pair of lasers joined with the massive autocannon in obliterating the nose of Rake's fighter tearing up into the cockpit a bare instant after he ejected, even as his own lasers tore at the Hunchback's chest. Yates screamed in frustration as the sudden movement threw off her own aim, scattering fire across the mech without penetrating anything vital. Then she was past, and even as she began an evasive roll, a series of hammer blows rattled her in the cockpit, and her right wing flashed red, then black on the display. "Base, this bastard knows what he's doing, we're both gone" she gasped, as she fought the G-forces from the out of control spin to hit the ejection button. By some combination of luck, instinct, and skill, she managed to hit it when her fighter was right side up, and she watched as her beloved bird crashed and tumbled along the ground below moments later. She was then startled as *something* flew right past her, just below the treeline, that looked too damned small to be piloted. "And they have sensor drones. Base would really probably have wanted to hear about those."

Simmons hated fucking trees. In addition to breaking up line of sight for visual and IR based targeting, they also made it impossible to

move at anywhere near a decent pace. Just to make things that little bit worse, these yokels had an annoying tendency to put giant metal towers up in odd spots, he'd actually opened fire on two of them, even wasting one of his Griffin's LRM salvos on the sudden MAD contact before realizing his mistake (and the two chuckleheads with him were still making jokes at his expense). Still, with the terrain, there was no way the bastard who'd killed their air support could have made it this far, and he had Menk's Wasp and Randall's Jenner out on the flanks to make sure he wouldn't get ambushed. They just had to find a good position high up to wait for the slowpoke lance to make their way into contact with the target, and they'd hit the enemy in the rear whether he tried to engage or evade, while the command lance moved through the slowpokes to crush him.

Dansel hated fucking trees. On the other hand he loved infrastructure improvement, whether it be the network of roads, the gps network that allowed him to make best use of them, or whatever utility service it was that needed big honking metal towers dispersed across the landscape. None of those prevented his mech from getting covered in sap and remnants of branches though, or allowed his direct line of sight to improve (although on reflection the last was probably a silly complaint, given the composition of the opposing forces, and the tragically short range of all his weapons). Still, it meant that when he took his shot, he had to go for the best available target, instead of something that might be immediately fatal.

The first warning Simmons had was a series of impacts smashing down the length of his mech's left leg, driving him down to one knee and causing a pair of lasers to shoot through the space right above his head. This was followed by a foliage coated Hunchback charging straight towards him, with, of all things, a club in each hand. He frantically brought up his right arm, nailing the descending right arm with a snap ppc shot, even as the lefthand club smashed into his interposed limb instead of his cockpit. Still, the impact further unbalanced him, sending him crashing fully to the ground as the Hunchback continued past.

As Simmons levered himself to his feet, Randall's Jenner came into view, and unleashed everything he had dead center at the

Hunchback, apart from a stray laser to shot to the mech's head, and received the same in return. Unfortunately for Randall, while this sort of behavior was barely survivable for a Hunchback, it was in no way what a Jenner was designed for, and his mech crashed helplessly to the ground as the cockpit canopy blasted outwards. Simmons regained his feet, and had just one moment to abstractly appreciate the staggering path the Hunchback took as it spun, before the right hand club filled his field of vision.

Dansel almost lost his footing, before his spin was abruptly stopped by an impact that ran down the right arm of his mech. Glancing down at the fallen Griffin, with it's newly shattered head, he had just one moment to feel queasy, before the belatedly arriving Wasp dispelled the building reaction to ending a life. Reflexively firing all weapons again, Dansel cursed a moment later as he realized he'd wasted one of only six remaining shots on a damned 20 ton tin can of all things. Still, it was difficult to argue with the results, as his weapons converged from both sides, the lasers carving away at the left arm until only tattered remnants remained, the mammoth autocannon devouring the entirety of the right arm, before driving its shattered remnants into the torso. *Well darn, trying to aim center mass in the middle of a fight is a lot harder than I thought* Dansel mused, as he charged forward to the falling mech, viciously stomping down on it's left leg. Noting the caved in section of armor where the Wasp's missile launcher had been located, he triggered his external speakers "Now, if you'll just refrain from making any transmissions and eject when I tell you to, I won't have to hunt you down and dismember you like I did your mech. How's that sound?"

Captain Li-Feng, of the unimaginatively named dropship 'Base' turned from watching the infantry and salvage group depart and said "Right, you brought me slaves. I get that. Slaves are good, we can always use slaves. What I don't get is why you brought a pair of broken ones." he pointed, indicating the one in the wheelchair, and the other missing most of one arm.

"Well Captain, this way we have a couple that we can execute to encourage the others without impacting the bottom line. Besides, they were right there, and I didn't want them wandering off to tell the militia anything. Although there's one loud bastard I may want to shoot first" Sao-Me was an oily bastard, but he did have a brilliant handle on human resources, pirate-style.

"Damnit, you have to listen to me! I'm Captain Burgess Hale, off of the dropship *Drakon*, before that traitorous bastard left us all here to die! He's led you all into a trap, and if you don't listen to me, the crazy bastards here are going to kill you all!"

"Right, fine, come with me to the wardroom, I'll hear you out, and if I don't like what I hear, I'll kill you." Motioning for his bodyguards to follow and bring the mouthy prisoner along, Li-Feng left the room.

Sao-Me stopped suppressing his sadistic grin, and loudly said "Right, I'm just going to evaluate the physical fitness of you for your new lives. I'm thinking for a start... Jumping Jacks."

The man in a wheelchair started at that impossible command, then started babbling "Look, okay, you want useful slaves mate, I get that. I can show you how to work all that loot you got, save you time, keep any of it from getting broke by accident, and you can kill that useless one-armed bastard over there for an example, and let me live to show the benefits of cooperation, right?"

Sao-Me nodded thoughtfully, already contemplating how he'd twist the wording of any deal made to result in the cripple's painful death. "All right then, show me, and *I* won't kill you." Hearing the subtle emphasis their leader had imparted to his words, the remaining troops chuckled, life was always more fun when those damned wet-blankets in the infantry had been sent off on make-work.

"Right okay, just open that box there, and pass me the laptop. Yeah the big thing taking up most of the box. Right, I'm booting it up, it'll just be a moment. Meanwhile, throw me one of the things in the box that says mini-recorder. Now what you do, is you hit this button and it records all the sounds around it, like 'Lewis is a wanking cunt'. Sixty hour memory, great for eavesdropping, insurance policies

against betrayal, and recording the drunken ramblings of your mates for blackmail purposes when they sober up. Okay, now throw me that Nikon box there. Here we've got a digital camera, top of the line ten times optical, sixty times digital enhancement, uses these little memory cards for additional space, the largest one we've got will hold like a thousand pictures. Now I'll warn you the low-light compensating flash on these things can be a little **bright**.

"Simmons come in. Randall or Menk, report." Craigston mouthed a curse before switching channels, saying "Still nothing from the fast and the foolish base. By its transponder we've got Menk's Wasp making it's way back slowly, but he's not saying anything. Moving to intercept, then we'll check the condition of the other two and the fighters. But we're bugging the hell out if we spot this guy, I'm not going to try to engage a Hunchback if it's already wasted two guys and our aeriojocks, unless he's already chewed the hell up." Ending the transmission, Craigston set his Whitworth back into motion, followed by Johnny's Blackjack, and Marky's Urbanmech lagging well behind. "Head's up guys, we should be seeing him through the treeline any moment." he said, as they continued to carefully make their way up the mountainside.

"Eject" was the word that reverberated across the area, at a ninety decibel loudspeaker powered whisper. Moments later, the limbless torso of a mech came crashing down on the Blackjack, knocking it off it's feet. A bare instant passed, followed by a single laser precisely spearing into the carefully peeled open ammunition compartment of the Wasp. Within seconds the light mech was reduced to a scattering chaff cloud, as the Blackjack under it was pounded into scrap by the involuntary suicide bomber on top of it.

Craigston had only seconds to assimilate this, as the battered form of Quasimodo charged downhill at a reckless pace, kept from tilting forward into an inevitable uncontrolled roll only by the recoil of the

continuously hammering Kali Yama cannon. He fired his missiles back, seeing two thirds of them hit despite the now obscenely short range, then cursed as the jump jets in his right leg went offline under the continuous barrage. Frantically backpedaling, he triggered his one laser which joined with Marky's autocannon to obliterate the armor on his target's left arm. Still, seemingly unstoppable, the leaf smeared apparition carried forward, burying its right hand club in the side of his mech, and leaving it there, before continuing past. Craigston bemusedly watched his displays for a second, wondering *who the hell would equip a battlemech with damned club of all things, much less two?* This thought was smashed out of him as the auto-ejection sequence launched him out of his cockpit, a bare instant before his mech's missile storage erupted. As he descended through the treeline, he saw Marky trying to jump to gain distance as the two remaining mechs exchanged autocannon and laser fire, before he lost sight of the fight.

Unstrapping himself from the seat, he noted that his sidearm had apparently come loose at some point, and grabbed the pack that he'd stashed in the chair. He froze as he heard a rustling noise from the bushes behind him, followed by the words "He's got a purty mouth. Get a rope."

Dansel heaved a sigh of relief as the walking trashcan crashed to the ground, fired his lasers one last time to be sure, and was rewarded by the sight of the cockpit panel blasting off, followed by the pilot halfheartedly being launched by a malfunctioning ejection system only to land at the mech's feet. He then began processing the diagnostic data he'd been working quite hard to ignore while the fighting had continued. *Right then, Left Arm, Right Arm, Center torso, Left Leg armor all gone, other armor locations chewed up, right hand mace lost, and exactly three salvos left for the big gun. I think it's time to dis-the-fuck-engage, they should be pretty well distracted by now by the need to salvage their fallen.* At that moment, the incoming sensor feed lit up with rapidly approaching targets, apparently the last pirate mechs had managed to slip the sensor net, and he hadn't noticed. He scrambled back to the treeline, but there was really no chance of outpacing them in the long term. *Hmm, must work on improving situational awareness* Setting his radio for open broadcast, he affected a bored tone, and merely said "Next?"

Burgess Hale wondered what was taking so long, there was only so much time he could continue stringing together a coherent line of consistent utter bullshit. Fortunately, those odd books they had on this planet provided some frankly brilliant conspiracy theory material. Taking a deep breath, he continued "What you have to understand, is that Comstar has been working to their own agenda since the days of Blake, they've got all these secret colonies all over the place, some of them don't even know they're colonies, since the people there have been brought up from birth to think of it as their birthworld. They'll throw pirate groups or mercs at them now and again to test how the development matches with their pet theories, all the while raising their private armies to further the master plan. It's the only hope they have of stopping the return of Kerensky's children, Wolf's Dragoons are just their first scouting party."

A knock sounded at the door "New intelligence for you captain, it sheds light on the situation." On hearing that phrase, Hale made sure to be facing away from the door, and shut his eyes for good measure as it opened. A series of thumps followed.

"Wardroom Clear, Captain secured" Major Lewis said as he stepped into the room. "Good to see our trust in you wasn't misplaced."

"Trust hell, if you think I don't know there's a mike, and probably a bomb on this locator, you must be as dumb as you seem to think I am. I've just always hated this sadistic band of slaving fucks."

"Fair enough then. All stations report."

"Bridge secure."

"Cargo Bays secure"

"Engine Room, could use some help, but kind of secure. Oi! If I hear

any of you fucks move agin, I'll just let go of the grenades and take me chances! Sorry Captain, got a bit of a standoff here, Hutton's down, and I caught a wee bit of a needler burst, with me face. On the plus side, now we've got a cosplay group for the next con as the 'Proud wounded heroes of Suvla' since Dansel's got the insane all sewn up. Don't suppose you've heard of any bionic eyes in Battletech, have ye? Oh thank Christ, the relief's here, it's a damned good thing these people don't know the markings for a smoke grenade, I'm just going to go into shock now."

Major Lewis closed his eyes for a second, before saying "All right secure the prisoners, keep them under guard, we've got a nutjob mech jockey to save again."

"We'd better not, if he's fucked up my mech, I'm going to put his real address up on the net for all his fangirl stalkers" Hale muttered.

CNN reporter Barry Wise suppressed a wince as yet another tree crashed to the ground right next to his van. Even at this distance, and being nowhere near the line of fire, that had been the third near-miss so far as they scrambled to keep the action in sight. "This is Barry Wise, once again reporting on the ongoing action in the Cacade Mountains. This is the fourth engagement with the invaders in which Quasimodo has participated, and at its worst odds yet. My technical consultant has informed me that at not only four to one numerical odds against, but also in terms of sheer mass, this fight started as a near-hopeless endeavor. Even if faced in an immaculate machine, which Quasimodo certainly is not at this time, the pilot's prospects for victory would be bleak. Astoundingly, the pilot, whose identity we have been unable to confirm, has already disabled one of the largest of his opponents, but remains boxed in by the other three. I remind my viewers once again that this footage is not going out in real-time, so as to keep from compromising the operations of our military for-"

"Yes!" was the unprofessional shout from his cameraman that

interrupted Wise's commentary, as a precise burst of autocannon fire sent the Phoenix Hawk crashing bonelessly to the ground, feebly twitching for a moment before the pilot ejected.

"No. He has to be out of ammo now, and the damned Rifleman's still on it's feet and nearly untouched, along with the Panther cowering behind it and sniping. Oh hell no." The crew's 'technical expert', which amounted to an intern attached to Wise for the planned interview because of his familiarity with Battletech, groaned as fire from the two remaining mechs neatly removed Quasimodo's arms, and as an insulting afterthought smashed the autocannon. "He's had it, he's only got a freaking small laser left, and he's not Aidan Pryde."

Oddly, the Rifleman's arms picked that moment to flip backwards, and lasers beams and streams of tracers reached up into the air, followed moments later by a small explosion above it. At the same time, the Hunchback unleashed an inarticulate roar as it charged straight for its opponents. As it closed, the two remaining pirates frantically fired everything they had in an attempt to bring it down, but the Panther was only able to get a clear shot at a leg past the Rifleman, and the Rifleman fired too early as it desperately backpedaled, it's targeting systems and actuators misfiring under the overload of heat it had built up from constantly firing its heavy weapons. Quasimodo met the Rifleman head first, crushing the heavy mech's cockpit and tilting it backward.

Astoundingly, the Hunchback maintained the momentum of its charge, running up the falling body of its victim to crash headlong into the Panther. As both mechs descended to the ground in a pile of tangled wreckage, the intern's voice could be heard in an awed whisper: "Aidan Pryde's a wanker."

Private Jones came back to consciousness slowly. the last thing he remembered was the sight of a drastically slimmed down Hunchback filling his viewscreen, followed by a great deal of motion and pain.

He tried for a diagnostic from his mech, but was unable to get past the ubiquitous blue screen of death, even with a hard reboot. Since at the very least that was going to require the intervention of a tech to undo, he sighed, and began manually opening the emergency hatch. Upon cracking it open, he was able to take one breath of welcome fresh air, before a wild-eyed maniac, incongruously clad in an immaculately pressed unfamiliar uniform, began beating the living shit out of him with a metal bar while shouting at him.

Punctuating his rant with swings of the bar Dansel vented his frustration: "You Stupid! Miserable! Shit! If you had used! Your fucking! Range! And mobility! I wouldn't! Have been able! To get away with that!" A series of clicks and an exaggerated throat clearing from the ground interrupted his ranting, and he paused mid-swing. Looking up, he found at least twenty men in a rough semi-circle around him on the ground, all with guns trained, trying to hold in their laughter.

Their leader spoke up "While the techs will no doubt appreciate your critique of Jonesy's piloting, and may let you have another shot at him later, I really think a surrender is in order right now."

"Very well, you wish to surrender? I accept." Seeing the blank, non-plussed stares of the pirates, Dansel sighed "You've even lost the classics, truly, a wretched pile of scum and villainy." *pile? heap? oh that's right, hive. damn, well, it's not like they know the line.*

"We're making all due allowance for the repeated trauma to the head your mech suffered, but play time's over. I'll shoot Jones myself if I have to clear a line of fire for my men, I owe the bastard money anyway."

"It really isn't too late for you to defect you know. We even gave the last group of pirates that came over to our side key positions in our military, and hell, one of them's piloting a mech against you lot as we speak" Seeing a truck burning rubber towards them from the direction of the dropship, Dansel deliberately let his eyes widen as he looked past the group, but they weren't having any of it, only one two man team turned to look, before turning back as they realized it was one of their own transports.

The truck stopped, and a group of men in ragged battle scarred armor pile out. Dansel did a double take at the sight of one man lacking a weapon or helmet, then desperately tried to suppress an evil grin as they assumed combat positions. Pitching his voice to carry to everyone present, he said "All right, I lied, it is too late to defect. If all of the murderous scum present could kindly drop their weapons and place their hands behind their heads, this will go much more smoothly."

The pirates stared at him in disbelief, then started at the sound of a set of all too familiar clicks behind them. Finally unable to suppress himself, and seething at the fact that he hadn't been given a damned *helmet*, Burgess Hale shouted "What the hell did you do to my mech, you syphilitic inbred Liao-fucker?!"

Okay, first part of snippet. Critiques and comments welcome. It's quite rough and I'm not sure I got the native Earther characters down right, but meh.

Location: Leopard class dropship Jolly Roger

En route to "Motherload."

ETA: Imminent.

The Jolly Roger's drive plume lit up the night as only a fusion torch can. She was burning hard for Motherload

"So we drew the short stick, eh Blue?" Natalie asked.

"Nonsense, Lassie! I volunteered us!" The dropship's captain, "Cap'n Robert Steiner-Davion-Ashworth-Bluebeard-Covenant the Fourth" was a bit eccentric. Well, more than a bit eccentric. In truth, Natalie doubted he came from any noble lines, much less truly important ones like the Steiners and Davions. She'd always suspected that he just randomly tacked on words to the end of his name for amusement. Still, Robert, or "Blue" as everyone called him, was dependable in his insanity.

He was insane by the numbers.

There was no man Natalie would trust more in her lance's dropship, even if he had been the one to get them into this mess.

"This mess" referring, of course, to the plan. That is, the *Jolly Roger*, being amongst the flotilla's most expendable assets, would move in first to make sure the motherloaders hadn't been busy as bees and set up defenses.

If they had, she'd perish quite quickly; the ship wasn't in good shape. It'd only been half-repaired from the last fight, and while it was space and airworthy, it couldn't stand up to much weapons fire. Not unless the motherloaders had a couple tons of armor that they could be 'persuaded' to donate to Natalie's cause.

She grinned. Facing down an assault mech tended to make one

reevaluate what they would do to survive.

Jolly Roger's weaponry had been replaced with a pair of small lasers. More navigational aids than weapons, really. Everything else had ended up being used as spare parts for the lance within the hold. Fortunately, that lance was more than capable of taking anything the Motherloaders could throw at it. Natalie was sure of herself and her lancemates.

Listening in on Motherload's communications had been enlightening - She now knew the capital of their most powerful (and thus most wealthy) nation; a place called "The US."

She wondered if there was a nation called "The THEM" somewhere.

At any rate, striking the US capital was right up her alley. Kick the Motherloaders in the face by taking their capital and she'd break any effective resistance. It's how war went in the Inner Sphere. Bump off the leadership and take over yourself. Change the flags a bit, maybe have some public executions of the old high officials to crack down on rebellion, and rule your docile peasant population.

Princess Natalie of the Oosa kinda had a ring to it. And then she'd have all sorts of frilly dresses, and PPC capacitors, and chocolate - Oh, chocolate! Devilishly good chocolate as far as the eye could see. In fact, she'd commission the peasants of the USA to make an entire mech out of chocolate just because she could.

She was startled from her daydream by the drop-buzzer. Five minutes till drop. If the motherloaders were going to do something, they'd be doing it right about... Now.

She paused and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she realized she hadn't died in a flurry of laser, LRM, or, heaven forbid, nuclear fire. Things were going well so far.

"Alright, status check," she asked, patching into her unit's frequencies.

"Yarr, this be yer captain speaking. We are on our way down to Motherload now. No ground fire detected. Looks like those bilge rats

on the Drakon weren't totally full of parrot dung after all. I am sending the 'all be clear' message to the flotilla now. Err... Me hearties."

"Boss, can you please get him to drop the pirate act? I know we do a little pillaging on the side, but this is embarrassing." The voice belonged to Mechwarrior Edwin Tyron; he was Natalie's second, pilot of the Stinger *Blue Thunder*. A more loyal man she'd never met - though whether it was because he wanted her, or whether he was just naturally loyal, she couldn't say.

"Shut up Tyron; it's better than last week. Unless you want a visit from Captain Fairy again?" And this voice belonged to Mechwarrior Janet Barnes, the other talkative member of Natalie's lance. She drove the Stinger *Grassman*. Natalie had always suspected that Barnes was here for Tyron, at least from the way the latter was always trying to get the man's attention and making eyes at him.

"And a fuck you to you too, Barnes." Tyron replied. Natalie could tell the spot of good humor in it.

Two taps on the microphone followed. That was the fourth member of Natalie's lance, Brox. No surname, no title. Just... Brox. He was a mute, born with a rare genetic condition at birth that left him with a malformed voice box. At least, that's what the file said. Natalie had never heard him even try to speak. The man communicated via a pad of paper and, when necessary, Morse code tapped into his commo set.

If she were being honest with herself, she'd admit that Brox was even more skilled than she was when it came to mecraft. The moves she'd seen him pull still drove her mad trying to figure out just how he'd done them.

"Me mateys! We will be landing momentarily at a civilian starport in this "Wash-ing-ton," Me crow's nest is seeing a sizable gaggle of tanks and infantry moving to meet us! Remember, loot and *then* burn!"

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"Y'know, Ants... You ever wonder what the fuck is going on?" Private

Blooper, officially known as Private Bob Buckland asked, staring out from the top of a multi-story car park in downtown DC. Infantry like their platoon had been spread out all through the city with anti-tank weapons, and told to dig in and wait for the mechs to come. There was also an armored company that'd been tapped for defending the capital. The only problem was that it was concentrated on the other end of the city from the pirate dropship, which meant that the pirates would probably reach them before the treadheads would.

In the distance, they could see the sunbright plume of superheated atmosphere that was a dropship's fusion drive pulsing to the ground. Yeah, the pirates would definitely hit them first.

"Eh, Blooper?" Corporal Anton "Ants" Greene asked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, the stars change, giant killer robots are dropping from the sky... And to top it all off, we're working with the Reds!"

"And you know, I think there's a cat and a dog somewhere getting along together too," Ants replied. "But to answer your question, nope. No idea what's going on. My kid keeps talking about how cool it is that Battletech is real and all, but I haven't heard anyone guess as to what exactly happened to us. Will we ever actually get home again, or are we stuck in this wartorn hellhole forever?"

"We brought our home with us. Think about it, Ants. Earth and the nearest real estate... Everything ever touched by our hands. And now we know there's life out there. Well, technically it all came from here in the far future, but hey, we aren't alone! That's gotta count for something, right?"

"I guess, Bloop," Ants replied, sighing. "Amy keeps asking if I can bring her home a souvenir. Says she wants a real life battlemech."

"She doesn't want much, does she?" Blooper replied. "Haha, maybe she could enlist when she hits eighteen. That's the only way she'll ever get to see one besides CNN."

"Nah, Kathy would crawl out of her grave to feast upon my delicious

brains if I let Amy do something like that. She didn't like it when I fought, much less her sparkling darling daughter," Ants replied, "I'm worried though. Amy's impulsive. When she learns there's mechs landing here in DC, she might do something... *rash*."

"Like father like daughter, eh Ants?" Bloop replied.

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"Natalie! Something *big big* be going down in orbit." Blue said.

"How big?" Natalie asked.

"Oh, about three hundred and fifty kilotons big."

Natalie blinked. Her mind started wracking itself looking for references to the word kiloton. She'd heard it somewhere before.

No way.

"You're saying the motherloaders are tossing around nukes up there?"

"Aye, lass. Aye."

"Okay Blue, just this once I'm going to forgive you volunteering us as bait!" She replied, "It makes switching to that other jumpship worth the aggravation."

"Do we continue with our nefarious plans?" Blue asked.

"Yeah. Yeah – they probably won't nuke their own cities, and we damn well can't go back up without dealing with those nuke launchers. Stick to the plan. We land, kick their leadership in the nards, and set ourselves up for life. It'll be easy."

Brox tapped out "yeah, right" in Morse code on his microphone.

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Moments later, the *Jolly Roger* set down. Its doors opened, bathing

Natalie's mech in warm early-day sun.

In the distance, she could see the tall skyscrapers of an industrialized civilization standing proudly.

Also in the distance, she could see a small platoon of Motherloader tanks. They were about six klicks off and across the river, just out of range of her mech's ER PPC.

The Motherloaders had apparently spread their forces around the city, with most of their heavier armor concentrated around a base to the south east. Natalie had landed to the city's southwestern starport, so it'd take them some time to push through the tide of fleeing civilians or loop around to reach *Jolly Roger*.

Something rattled her armor, peeling a small chunk off.

She hadn't even left the dropship yet. Bah.

Another shot hit her mech, pinging off the torso plate. It was the Motherloader tanks. They were opening up on her, hulls down, from an almost unheard of range. Lostech targeting systems, right. After the nuclear reception in orbi-

Wait a second. Why had they let her through?

In the back of her mind, a strange voice was whispering "It's a trap!"

"Janet, stay back and keep an eye on the *Roger*. It's our ticket off this rock if things go even more pear shaped. Brox, Edwin, sweep around and deal with those entrenched tanks. I'll draw their fire and keep them focused on me." Natalie said.

Her mech broke into a run, charging the tanks and periodically firing off semi-aimed blasts from her PPC to keep their attention focused solely on her, and not her flanking lancemates.

What those tanks lacked in firepower, they more than made up for in accuracy.

"Lass, there be another dropship landing ten klicks to the northwest; a pirate Leopard. They're some of Vorax's swabbies, and they're telling us to stay out of the way, if we know what's good for us. The scurvy dogs! Crowsnest reads... Wow. That's a mite of a heavy lance. Vorax isn't playing around. By the manifests I borrowed from the fleet, that lance has a Marauder, Rifleman, Archer, and Crusader. All in pretty good condition, and all refitted for close combat." Blue said.

"Fuck them. This city is ours! We were here first!" Natalie replied as she fired off another burst of charged particles towards the Motherloader tanks.

"I know you've got a Battlemaster, but they've still got a serious weight advantage on us, boss. And the close in distance will favor them. Your PPC isn't going to be too helpful at point blank. I think we should let them have the city and pull out." Tyron said.

"Not going to happen." Natalie replied. "There's not much elsewhere to go."

One of her PPC blasts hit a Motherloader tank in the turret. The metal boiled, running down to the tank's hull in great streams. *One down.*

Tyron sighed. "You're the boss, but if I die from this, I'm so going to haunt your ass."

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Brigadier General Norwell was not a happy man. It fell to him to organize the defense of the DC metropolitan area. Unfortunately, intelligence had screwed the pooch and told him – *assured* him – that the Pirate dropships would have to land to the south east. He'd thus concentrated the majority of his armored brigade between Andrews AFB and DC itself.

And then what happened? Two pirate dropships landed right as they pleased to the south *west*, while most of his men were on the other side of the damn city. And to make matters worse, pirate aerospace fighters were keeping his own birds grounded with their thrice-

fucked super armor and lightspeed laser weapons. It didn't help matters that he wasn't even allowed to use his artillery to the fullest extent, because they wanted as much Battletech intact as possible. To say nothing of leaving Washington intact. He didn't want to be the man who went down in history as the one who destroyed the capital.

"Okay, what are our options?" He asked. "Is there anyone who can move on the pirates in time?"

"Negative, sir. Just some scattered armored platoons, but our lines to the south are way too thin."

"How about-"

"Wait, sir. President Ryan just bought us the use of some mercenaries." One of his junior Colonels spoke up.

"What?"

"Yeah. Apparently the pirates hired some mercs to bolster their numbers. And these mercs count "getting nuked in orbit" as a contract violation. Then, a lot of gold later, and we've got the use of four mercenary mechs and some infantry."

"I see. Get on the horn and tell them to hit the dropship at Reagan, then swing up and nail the other one. Tell them that we prefer if they leave the enemy dropships as intact as possible."

"On it, general."

"Now, what's the word on the ground?"

"The first dropship unloaded a strange mixed lance – three Stinger class mechs and a Battlemaster, all painted in a dull grey/white. I've had my signals men running over the FASA sourcebooks, but the insignias and colors don't match any major merc units in the books. The second one is a bit more homogenous. All heavy mechs with a lot of firepower between them. Markings paint them as from Port Krin's militia, so they're genuine pirates."

"Well, tell the men to keep an eye out for more, and to aim for the cockpits if they can."

"Yes, sir."

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"Lass, we've got another problem." Blue said.

"What, more claim jumpers-" Natalie replied, spraying her machineguns over yet another building filled with SRM-laden infantry. The little ticks were everywhere, and they were starting to get on her nerves. "You know, I'm getting tired of this shit."

"Me too, Lass. But no, not claim jumpers. Not exactly. The Buron Cavalry. They're one of the mercenary companies that Vorax hired. They've landed nearby in their dropship, and they aren't responding to me squawk. I'm getting kind of nervous here." Blue said.

"You're nervous?" Janet piped in. "How do you think I feel! A dropship is non gratis for shooting. But, me? I'm in a stinger! You couldn't paint a bigger bullseye on me if you tried!"

"We don't know why they're here. Keep trying to reach them, and don't do anything dangerous. I'm heading back." Natalie replied.

"Boss! Those mercs are attack-PUNCHING OUT!" Janet screamed.

Natalie swore. This was just great. Just fucking great. A tiny icon on her HUD, representing Janet's mech, turned from green to yellow. At least she got out in time.

Unfortunately for Natalie, she didn't realize that the carpark she'd just sprayed with heavy caliber bullets wasn't totally clear. Things were about to get worse.

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Anton Greene was not having a good day. His platoon's Javelins weren't doing much more than pissing off that monstrous mech, and

its machine guns were doing decidedly more than just pissing off his platoon in return.

He looked at his rifle and put it down. People it could kill, but giant killer robots? Not happening.

He looked at his pack, set aside by a particularly sturdy-looking support column. Or at least it had been particularly sturdy-looking, before that mech's machine guns had thoroughly perforated it.

A role of duct tape was clipped to it, and his leather notebook lay next to the pack. Anton always tried to keep a notebook with him. He hoped that maybe once his stint in the army was over, he'd be able to publish his drabbles as something worthwhile.

He smiled a cracked, shark-like smile. The first of many rather unhinged grins he'd go through before the day was done. Before the shift, he'd had a preference for writing science-fiction. He'd written scores of pages of sci-fi war. But now, with mechs roaming the streets and lasers and working fusion reactors, perhaps he wasn't writing sci-fi so much as modern war fiction.

The mech had turned and stopped, its cockpit facing him. With a good leap he could probably jump and reach it. He almost got the impression it was talking to someone.

Probably on a radio, or whatever the hell these things used.

And then, a thought struck him. That thing had an awfully huge cockpit. If the pilot was smart, he'd be worried if someone stuck explosives to it.

Ants' grin fell. He didn't have any explosives handy. The javelins had already shown they couldn't dent-

-His eyes fell upon a case of MREs in the corner. His platoon had brought them up because they didn't know how long they were going to stay here.

Another crazy idea made its way across his cerebral matter. Crazy,

sure, but it was a damn sight better then getting machine-gunned when that mech finally noticed him.

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"-Alright, I'm on my way back now," Natalie replied. "Brox, Tyron, fall back to the dropper. See if we can't pick up Janet on the way back. I – WHAT THE HELL."

"Boss?" Tyron asked.

A native man, clad in grey and black urban combat fatigues, had leapt from the nearby structure and onto *Old Melville's* cockpit, to which he now clung.

Natalie almost moved her mech's arm up to squash him like a roach, only to halt when she noticed what *else* he was wearing.

The man had a half dozen brown packages taped to his chest, with thin red and green wiring going between the packages and a small device in his hand.

He was wired to blow.

For the first time in her career as a mechwarrior, Natalie froze. A look of shock plastered itself all over her face.

The native grinned a wide, manic grin, and then pointed to a small notebook he held with his other hand.

It was open to a page which read: "SURRENDER OR DIE!"

Natalie blinked. Was this guy bluffing, or just insane?

Then, still clutching the detonator, the man seemed to peer even closer at her through the mech's transparent armored canopy.

He brought the notebook down and rested it on a precariously balanced knee, then, with his free arm, he hastily scrawled something else onto the notebook's page and held it up.

"P.S. YOU'RE CUTE! WANT TO GO OUT?"

Natalie filed the man away under the "insane" category. He probably wasn't bluffing.

"Okay, okay. You win." She mouthed the words to him.

"Lass... The Mercs are demanding my surrender. I'm sorry." Blue replied instead. "If it's any consolation, they want me to surrender to the Motherloaders, so it's not like I have to be indentured to Vorax. Err... Arrrrgh. Have to keep up appearances, y'know."

The Mercs had signed up with the natives. That was interesting. The wheels in her mind turned suddenly. One thing hurt her ego more than anything else: She'd lost. She'd never lost until now. Without the dropship, she was stuck here without supplies or aid.

On the other hand, the Motherloaders clearly had no problems with mercs.

A new plan formed in her mind.

She popped her cockpit open and said "Okay, get your ass in here!" to her hitchhiker. Then, "I surrender."

And then she opened a wide-band communiqué to the motherloaders. "Attention, US defenders, this is Lance leader Natalie Fischer of Fischer's Firelances. I want to make a deal."

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"They want what?" General Norwell rubbed his temples, trying to deal with the migraine forming between them.

"They help the Buron Cavalry fight off the second lance assaulting DC. Then they stand down and let us have their mechs and equipment. In exchange, we give them back relatively intact when we're done with them. Oh, and they want a "standard merc's wage" to cover expenses."

"And if we refuse?" Norwell asked.

"They keep fighting. They could probably kill a lot of people if they go for hit and run raids against our civilians. Our mercenaries have their dropship, so they aren't leaving. Either they have to surrender completely, or they'll go on a blaze of glory run and start killing people wholesale."

"Okay. We're taking the deal. Getting some more cooperative technicians with knowledge of Btech will be enough to soften the blow. I just hope the President and the Joint Chiefs agree," Norwell replied. "Tell them that we accept, and that we want them killing that second lance of pirates yesterday."

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"Attention Buron Cav, this is Black Widow. We've signed up for the motherloaders too, so you can stop getting ready to shoot us."

"Black Widow?" The native asked from behind in the cramped cockpit. "Natasha, is it you? And does Colonel Wolf know you're out here?"

Natalie turned her head, twisting like a tank's turret acquiring the next target. "Do I LOOK like a highly paid mercenary?"

"No, you look like a cheaply paid who - Hey, don't hit the man with fifteen kilos of explosives strapped to his body! Seriously though, do most mechwarriors wear such revealing uniforms?"

Natalie snorted. "Yeah, actually. You have any idea how hot it gets in a mech?"

"I'm guessing I'll find out. And I'm guessing it's not going to be a good erotic heat." He replied.

"You've got that right." From up front, where he couldn't see, Natalie smiled.

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DropShip *Distant Home*

Ready Room

On approach to Reagan International Airport

15th November, 2005/3020

"Change of plans. Everyone gets into the Mechs right now! We just received some orders from our new employers. Some of our former compatriots are running amok through their capital and have caught the locals on the wrong foot. And, to make the day really miserable, we have some jesters in ASF flying over the city and shooting at everything that looks like an air-breather. So they just ordered us into the breach."

Staedele activated his intercom. "Marc, get platoons one through three ready to go down the ramp right after us. Four and five are to stay and guard the ship. Hanna, I want you and the bridge crew to find out who we're dealing with."

After this, Staedele ran into the Mechbay, finding a scene that could best be describes as an organised chaos. Techs were scurrying around everywhere, performing last checks, loading ammo and pumping cooling fluid into the Mechs.

"So, honey, how's the *Eisen* doing?", he yelled over the noise to his wife. "Perfect, dear. Now go get on board, we have perhaps 5 minutes till ETA!" she shouted back.

With that, he ran over to *Altes Eisen*, his Warhammer. The Mech stood in one of the hangar niches, 70 tons of inert metal painted in an urban camouflage pattern and displaying the units colors, the emblem of their home town inside a light blue circle, as well as its personal ID, a black silhouette of a gothic era knight with the Mech's name stencilled below it. It wouldn't be inert for much longer now. Staedele climbed into the cockpit. Inside, he stripped down to the shorts and slipped into his cooling vest. Just as he sat down into the chair, he heard the techs outside slam the ammo hatch shut.

"Ready to start it up, Andreas", his wife's voice sounded from the internal com. Looking out of the windscreen, he saw that the last

techs were leaving the bay.

Staedele activated the computer system and, while it booted up, strapped in, put the neuro-helmet on his head and plugged the cooling vest into the system.

Please enter authorisation code... the computer droned.

"Altes Eisen rosted nicht." Staedele replied.

Authorisation confirmed. Checking neural pattern...

He felt the slight tingling as the neuro-helmet went active and scanned his neural pattern.

Neural pattern confirmed. Welcome back, Major. Performing reactor startup...

"Andreas", the com sounded, "I have something on that first dropship we'll be landing almost on top of. It's called the *Jolly Roger*. Apparently some small merc detail or something. The ship is almost ripe for the junkyard and pretty much unarmed. Their mech contingent... what the hell? Three Stingers and a BATTLEMASTER? Now that's a wierd bunch."

Reactor startup at 10%

Checking systems.....

Actuators.....nominal

Cooling system.....nominal

Myomer.....nominal

"Thanks Hanna." he replied. A Battlemaster? Now that could get interesting. The Stingers, however, were fodder.

Reactor startup at 30%

Gyro.....nominal

Communications.....nominal

Sensors..... nominal

All systems nominal.

"Got anything on the other bunch?", he asked.

Reactor startup at 50%

Checking weapons.....

PPC 1.....nominal

PPC 2.....nominal

"Not yet, unfortunately. ETA is in 2 minutes.", Hanna replied.

Reactor startup at 70%

SRM 6.....nominal

Ammo Feed.....nominal/fully loaded

Staedele could feel the vibrations of the reactor starting up and hear the clang as the ammo feed slammed the first salvo of SRM into the launch tubes.

Reactor startup at 75%

Small Laser 1.....nominal

Small Laser 2.....ERROR!

"Not again", he sighed before opening a radio contact to Marie. "Hey, honey, guess what?" Her answer came back, full of apprehension "Small Laser 2?" "Small Laser 2" he answered deadpan.

"Oh come on, that's bullshit! I personally made a complete check just 2 days ago."

Small Laser 2.....nominal

"Hey, seems like it decided to work after all", he said into the com.

"*Sigh*, I'll never understand that thing. It simply does whatever the hell it wants", Marie answered.

Reactor startup at 90%

Medium Laser 1.....nominal

Medium Laser 2.....nominal

All weapons nominal.

Hanna reported again: "Andreas, I got some camera footage from the

Jolly Roger. Seems like all the birds have flown out, only a single Stinger is guarding it. ETA is 20 seconds."

This made him snicker. That poor sod wouldn't know what hit him.

Reactor startup at 100%

Staedele hit the start switch. Under him, the massive 280 VOX fusion engine, after having been shut down for almost 6 months, came into full life and all systems of *Altes Eisen* started up. He activated the Mech's radio.

"Iron lance, this is Iron lead, all systems nominal. Report in."

"Iron 2, all systems green." Nedeljko's voice sounded.

"Iron 3, everything nominal" Miller answered.

"Iron 4, he makes some fuss about the left knee activator again, but nominal" Lemell exclaimed.

"Landing in 10...9...8..." the speakers in the hangar droned.

Staedele prepared himself for the touchdown.

"3...2...1...touchdown!"

The whole ship vibrated as it landed on the tarmac of the Ronald Reagan Washington International Airport. Seconds later, it's bay doors opened.

Staedele steered *Altes Eisen* out of it's niche in the bay and, with steps that caused the entire deck to vibrate, moved towards the open doors.

"Iron lance, form up. We've got a job to do".

Reagan International Airport
15th November, 2005/3020

"Ah, finally. Terra firma. Good to get out of the sardine can again."

"Cut the chatter, Iron 2. Okay Iron, skirmish line. We're moving north

to get that dropship." Staedele ordered. "Copper, form up behind us and get ready to storm that bird."

With thundering steps the Buron Cavalry's Mech lance advanced down the tarmac of the airport, closing in on the *Jolly Roger*. Meanwhile, the *Distant Home* was already lifting off again and setting course for Andrews AFB.

As they were closing in on the dropship, a Stinger slowly walked around the spheroid shape.

Seems like he really doesn't know what's going on, Staedele thought. He was aware that the *Jolly Roger* had tried to call him multiple times by now, but he had refrained from answering them. No sense to spoil the surprise, after all.

"Iron 3, he's all yours. Iron 2, cover her," he ordered. Miller was still a rookie and could use all the training she could get.

"Roger, boss!", Miller cheerfully replied.

Split seconds later, her Black Knight *Hammer* opened up on the still slowly moving Stinger with the PPC and both Large Lasers. Staedele shook his head. Chris still had to learn to respect the heat gauge. After that salvo, the internal temperature of her Mech would give her quite a bit of an uneasy feeling.

The results, however, were undeniably effective. The PPC hit the Stinger in the right leg, blowing through the thin armor as if it was made out of wet toilet paper and turned the knee activator into a mass of semi-molten junk. The Large Lasers both hit center mass, vapourising most of the Stinger's torso armor and sending a small rest of destructive energy right into the internal structure. Staedeles sensors registered a heat spike in the enemy Mech. Reactor damage.

Damaged like that and facing an enemy that was utterly and completely overpowering his little machine, the Stinger's pilot did the only sensible thing. He activated the ejection pod.

"Got him", Miller shouted over the com.

"Kill confirmed. Good shooting, Iron 3."

Staedele switched to an open channel.

"This is Major Andreas Staedele of the Buron Cavalry to the captain of the *Jolly Roger*. We have been hired by the local government to defend them against you lot. You will immediately surrender and let a platoon of my infantry come on board. I guarantee that no harm will be done to either you or your crew. You have one minute to answer, then I will let Mr. PPC do the talking. Staedele, out."

Switching back to the company channel, he saw the 3 platoons of Copper closing in in their light jeeps. He ordered 3rd platoon to get ready to secure the dropship.

"This' the *Jolly Roger*. Arrright, arrright, ye scurvy dogs. We surrender."

"Acknowledged, *Jolly Roger*. A platoon of my infantry will board you shortly. I expect nobody to be shooting at them."

So far, so good, Staedele thought. One down, one to go.

Then his com blinked again.

"Iron Lead, this is Mountain" the voice of his wife resounded. "We have an ID on the other enemy unit. They're Port Krin militia. Mech complement... oh oh."

"What?", he asked.

"You're not going to like this, darling. Those guys have a Crusader, an Archer, a Rifleman and a Marauder. They're all forming up to the east. I've got them with the drone, marked them on your tac-map."

Damnit, Staedele thought. That made 4 heavy and an assault Mech still at large. If those guys worked together, they would be able to lay down some serious hurt on his people.

"Wait, Iron, I get a transmission from that Battlemaster. Relaying it through."

"Attention Buron Cav, this is Black Widow. We've signed up for the motherloaders too, so you can stop getting ready to shoot us."

Black Widow?, Staedele thought. Oh girl, should Natasha Kerensky ever find out about this, you're fodder for the dogs.

"Nice to hear, Black Widow. That still leaves four dumbasses in this city trying to damage the assets of my new employers. Okay... Mountain, transmit our com protocols to Black Widow. Looking at the direction these guys are moving, we best meet up on the other side of the river. I just marked our meeting point as Nav Alpha on the tac-map. You got it, Widow?"

"Affirmative, Buron Cav."

"Copper, you'll have to take the bridge to the north. Try linking up with native units directly south to that big white building on the hill. Mountain, inform the local commander about this so he can tell his men not to shoot at us and give Copper some directions. Iron lance, move out."

Laisa Linstrom nervously checked her Federated Long Rifle for the fourteenth time. She knew it was in top condition; she'd made sure of that before the dropship left collar, but the familiar routine helped burn off nervous energy and keep her mind off why the dropship walls were humming with that stuttering groan. She kept half expecting to see the wall shear off somewhere. She wasn't quite sure what was happening; no one told the Poor Bloody Infantry anything, especially not a lowly noncom like her. However, Laisa had never been a fool and it was quite clear from what little she had managed to overhear or surmise, the force they were a part of had unexpectedly been attacked while still in space, and someone further up the chain of command was having a panic attack. Normally, that would have made her giggle -no lost love between her and the officers of the scratch company she had been attached to, but not when her life hung in the balance. That would be a terrible way to go, dead in the ship before she even got a chance to fight back. She hadn't even ever fired her weapon in anger.

She'd been assigned to guard duty back on port Krin, fairly cushy work assigned to her by a oily Second Lieutenant who no doubt wanted her there for reasons that had nothing to do with her sharpshooting. Previously, her reputation in the slums as a techhead allowed her to get away with wearing baggy, often grease-stained clothing, seemingly casual, but actually carefully chosen to hide her feminine features and deflect male attention. Getting the militia job had been a calculated risk -it would give her legitimate access to weapons and some legal protection (in as much as the law wasn't a joke in Port Krin), but she'd also made herself a target. Thank the Blessed Mary for Alan Short, one of the Comstar personnel at the HPG facility she'd found herself guarding. Delighted to discover that the new sentry was a passable technician, he'd struck up a friendship, and even taught her a little about computers. That had caused to smarmy L-T to back off, assuming that Alan's interest in her was of a different nature, and not wanting to infringe on Comstar's "turf". Of course, her technical and now computer knowledge had gotten her put on this godforsaken mission, so perhaps that hadn't been as much a blessing as it seemed at first. Even being a joygirl was better than dying on some foreign world.

Beauty was more often a curse than a blessing in Port Krin, something she knew all too well; her mother had been a slave in some crime lord's harem, passed down to underlings as she grew older and less strikingly beautiful. Laisa was grateful that while she could, if she cleaned up, maybe be called "cute", she had inherited few of her mother's good looks was no great head-turner, and had managed to largely avoid attention from that quarter. Her mother's stories told her what would happen if she caught too many eyes. Gretchen Handerson had been brutalized, but never broken, and eventually managed to find an out for herself, getting herself out of Port Krin by stowing away on one of the few remaining Fishing Trawlers that eked out what little seafood they could from Antallos's war-ravaged oceans. She'd married an engineer on the *Moonlit Dancer*, Lasti Linstrom and made a life for herself there. Laisa had grown up at sea, learning to be a mechanic and sailor, hard work but almost idyllic compared to running the streets of Port Krin after that bastard Niles Black has hot the *Dancer* up "for kicks" on a visit to the city. And the so called authorities hadn't done a damn thing, not wanting to pick a fight with someone who had a few lances of battlemechs under his command. She'd had to fight her way up from poverty, being lucky to make it back into port at all. Apparently, the bastard was on this adventure as well. She hoped he'd been blasted in orbit.

The ship shuddered again, but this time, Laisa recognized the sensation as the thrusters firing. They were landing. Murmuring a prayer of thanks, she started going over a last-minute re-check with the three other "technical staff" under her nominal command.

Seydlitz
Over southern California.

Pilot Emily "Loony" Hasting was proceeding in a sedate zigzag cruise South along the coast keeping a look out for any potential threat to the grounded drop ships.

'So far so good' she thought. "I haven't been shot at for a full 20 min" a good sigh considering the shit that got fired at them going in.

She spotted a few VTOLS on the flight but ignored them. They were definitely civilians and running away from her. Well trying to run anyway, nothing those poor birds could do but die if she decided to run them down, she was flying one of the fastest fighters in the Sphere. But she wouldn't, no point in being cruel and attacking defenseless targets. Besides she couldn't afford the heat any way. They had to rip out three of the heat sinks to help cool one of the mechs. They were that badly equipped and funded. That was why Brand was willing to compromise his principle and make the raid, the money was too good and they needed it too much. There was talk about selling one of the mech or her beloved Seydlitz to pay the bills before the call for units to raid Motherload came around. In all likelihood it would have been her ride. The mechs were the heavy lifters in the company, mechs got them jobs. Support vehicles like hers were always first on the chopping block. It looked like they could have enough to fix up the mechs and maybe even the fighter to full working order. Until they got to orbit.

The mechs were all intact but the dropships were in a bad way. Half the weapons were gone and almost all of the armor. The ships them could make orbit again but whether the crew could make it was another matter. She was glad they were in atmosphere when those big missiles hit. Looking at the exterior she was sure there were leaks all around the impact zone.

Suddenly she saw what Brand was afraid of. "Loony to base I have a large column of tanks in bound on your position I make it to be at least 60 repeat six oh tanks plus a mess load of other vehicles. Looks

like artillery and transports. Maybe 50 miles out"

"Rodger, you did good RTB"

Suddenly she noticed several fast moving dots on the radar screen coming directly at her. "No can do got some air breathers heading toward me." She prepared to climb to gain as much altitude as possible to be better to engage them.

Then all hell broke loose as the missile warning blared throughout her cockpit. First thing she did was to look around her to find the ground launcher nearby, wouldn't be too hard to hide one with all the vehicles on the road. But there was nothing rising up to meet her. Then she saw radar warning was indicating it was coming from directly ahead.

"That can't be right. They're too far."

But it was right. 2 AIM-120 missiles from an F-18, though she did not know their names, were heading strait for her small fighter. And there was nothing she could do about it. Those things were too far away, the odds of landing a hit were non existent. Firing now would only heat up the fighter prematurely

Hastings broke her fighter right diving for the deck as she did so. She saw the missiles turn to follow her path. "OK decent maneuverability."

She pushed the throttle up to full power and tried to get some distance on the missiles. They were still there. They were getting closer now, a lot closer, and she didn't even have any chaff. She broke into a zigzag using the VTOL thrusters to enhance her maneuvering; still they kept up with her. "OK, really maneuverable"

She dove into a wide left hand spiral getting the missiles to follow her.

"Closer, closer. Now!" she broke right using the ASF's thrust vectoring ability for all its worth. Such a use of the engine wouldn't be possible on a normal Seydlitz but this old bird had had its system overridden

and modified to enable a pilot, if they have the skill and death wish, to use the thrusters as such. On most other people the 12+ G turn would have blacked them out immediately, she grey out for a moment before regaining control of the ASF, just as she felt a large boom rock her fighter's starboard side. The first missile missed her but the second was far enough out to change course and hit her bird.

"Huh, that wasn't too bad" some missing armor but the wing was intact and working.

She turned her fighter toward the 6 contacts, 4 big one, and 2 small ones. There were certainly more where they came from. And she wasn't going to go out without a fight. A pair of the smaller air breathers entered the edge of the range of the single large laser she carried. "Gotcha"

In a stroke of luck just as the pilot was bout to pull the trigger to send 2 more missiles at her the laser sliced the fighter in 2 diagonally the port wing and part of the tail in one piece the rest of the fighter in the other. She could see a puff of smoke and fire form the front half and a parachute opening.

"Loony to base, the info was right these are right they are fragile. But they got some incredible range on their missiles."

Then her laser recycled and she took aim on the second which was also the one who had fired the 1st two missiles at her. She caught him in the belly just as he was banking to retreat. The laser caught the F-18 right near the nose were the cockpit was. The hit flash fried the pilot, he never felt a thing. The laser continued along almost exactly between the 2 engines cutting out just before it fully sliced the fighter in 2. It broke into 2 pieces anyway, and tumbled toward the ground.

USS Port Royal.

"Damn it got the other bug" said the Captain looking at the radar return showing 2 contacts where the was one seconds before. They could see

"It's making a break strait for the Tomcats." The XO commented.
"Must know it can't run. It's going to try to close to take them out."

"No more playing around the, Tomcats cleared to salvo all missiles."
He reported listening in on the chatter between the AWACS and the F-14s. "We also have clearance to fire if it heads our way."

"Lets see how it does against a swarm Phoenix first." The captain smiled.

In the air:

The 4 incoming F-14s let loose with all six Phoenix each the moment they received clearance to launch. They had seen the fellow pilot die in his craft.

In the Seydlitz Hasting's scope came alive as it reported multiple missile locks. They were still some ways away but she could see the offending fighters in her optics. She burned toward them as much as the old airframe would allow knowing that she was heading strait for the missiles fired.

Just as the missiles got uncomfortably close they came into range. She lined up and pulled the trigger to be rewarded with the sight of a wing spinning away and the fighter tumbling toward the ground. Then the heat wave hit her. There were too few heat sinks, the cockpit temperature was already approaching uncomfortable with the first two shots, now the cockpit—situated right to the laser—felt like an oven.

She turned her attention back on the missiles that were heading toward her. She knew that ay actions taken too early would be futile as the missiles would correct themselves. She would show them why she earned the call sigh "Loony".

She held her course pushing the fighter to go even waster. Then the missiles were upon her. She waited as long as possible. Just as the

missiles were about to hit she jinked her fighter right and up into a gap in the swarm of missiles. They passed so close that had these been the old missiles they would have detonated for a proximity kill.

Unfortunately for her these were launched by F-14s which meant they received targeting updates from the launch vehicle, the swarm turned around and pursued her as she turned west over the ocean. She weaved back and forth as sharp as she could using every thruster her fighter had to its disposal. But they were hot on her tail.

She was already flying beyond the fighter's normal limits now she pushed it further, every zig and zag was forcing her fighter to do things that the designers never intended for it to do. Even if she survived this her fighter wasn't going to fly again. But it was working; she broke the missiles off her tail every now and then, a few even detonated. However, while these missiles weren't as maneuverable as the first 2 but they were a lot more persistent. She glared with anger and despair as missiles that she thought had lost track and were going off into empty air would suddenly curve back around and rejoin the pack chasing her bird.

She was hurting too. The human body was never designed to take such force at all much less the constant changes in directions. One moment she was pressed into her seat, the weight of the own body threatening to crush her, the next her straps were digging into her skin threatening to cut her to pieces as they strained to keep her in her seat. She would have suffocated if not for the custom extra high O2 mix she used to enable her lungs to get the amount of oxygen she needed when they could barely inflate.

Then she saw white streaks rising from the ocean toward her.

Unlike the phoenix, which was, designed to hit slow moving bombers, these SM-2s were far more maneuverable. Unfortunately for Emily Hastings she had to find that out the hard way, as she tried the head-on dodge the missile changed course and hit her just below the nose. The shock reverberated through out the fighter and had her seeing stars. When she came back to her senses she saw that the large laser was inoperative, likely knocked out of alignment. The indicator for the front wheel was also blinking red indicating it was completely

disabled, likely destroyed considering where the missile hit.

Then she was rudely reminded that there were 20 more pressing concerns for her consideration by the one of those concerns slamming into the port wing. Fortunately for her earlier maneuvering meant that the missiles were strung out in a long line. That gave her just enough time to remember the other missiles and dodging right, firing the space maneuvering thruster and landing thrusters to send her fighter in to a right angle turn to her original course. That near blackout maneuver dodged another missile, but it wasn't enough. Two more Phoenix slammed one after the other into the already damaged starboard wing destroying all functions there and sending her into a clock wise roll. She was gutsy not suicidal and saw there wasn't a chance in hell the little Seydlitz was going to survive. Bracing herself she pulled the ejection handle. Powerful but short lived rockets accelerated her out of the doomed plane just as the main group of missiles caught up and annihilated it.

By Captain Gentry

NAS Miramar

14 November 2005

The day began looking up beat. The pirates were still sitting pretty in space. They'd finally gotten the fifth and sixth full motion simulators programmed to fly like old F-14As the night before, and now they could begin working up some of the old Air Force and Air National Guard Phantom, Voodoo, and Thunderchief flight crews.

The other four were already being used sixteen hours daily, hot seating as much as possible. The Schnoz was happy with the progress they'd made in just over 90 days from the word go. He already had most of his cadre requalified, and gotten a good start with the current service German, Italian, and British Tornado crews. None of the new guys were ready to strap on a Turkey for real yet, but then again even if they were, there were only enough birds for the cadre and the

most promising rookies.

He had Master Chiefs Leonard Kravitz (no relation) and Earl Lantana along with hundreds of former Tomcat maintainers working around the clock at the Boneyard turning ships as fast as they could but they'd already fallen behind, even his much less ambitious refurbishment program. Monroe had planned on 750 man hours average per hull to make them airworthy, with the easier hulls taking as little as 400 hours. He'd upped that to 1100 and 750 respectively from just over 10,000 flight hours in the 'Cat and a decade as a squadron CO and CAG.

Those numbers would have been accurate had the contractors performed the storage treatments correctly. What they'd done was seal the outside properly, cutting corners on the work to the internals. Heck, they'd even thrown out the corners on most of the birds leaving them filled with hydraulic and other fluids, including in a few cases fuel!

Those guys were all now in jail awaiting trial on a laundry list of federal charges that if they were found guilty would keep them behind bars for the rest of their natural lives.

When he'd spoken to Lenny and Earl earlier that morning they confirmed they would have another four hulls by Thanksgiving. Average maintenance hours was 1850 and 1100 respectively with the ones left gassed up taking as much as 2200 hours each. The original plan had called for 40 birds per month average; they were getting eight to ten. With four to eight months before the pirates should have possibly been able to return, they'd have enough to cover the most important of the likely targets but not all of them. Now they had the Bravos and Deltas beached at every CONUS NAS and in single squadron units in Hong Kong, Singapore, Ohakea New Zealand, UAE, Port Elizabeth South Africa, Sigonella, Landivisiau, Leuchars, and at some Dutch base near Rotterdam he could never recall the name of. Not enough, especially with only a tenth of the Snow Bear squadrons in place. Everyone else was out in the cold for this raid, maybe they'd have everything in place by the next one.

The NCA was reviewing the options, and so far they'd decided that

Australia's F-111 crews would remain with their Pigs, and all but the highest time Tornado crews from Italy would be sent back to their Eurofighter units. Further cuts were necessary, and Duane was glad he didn't have to make the call leaving good people defenseless or nearly so. None of those late fourth and fifth generation fighters carried anything with a warhead big enough to do squat to an aerospace fighter unless Murphy stepped in on Earth's side.

With newly unretired LCDRs Paul "Rat" Ratskeller and Joseph "Toe Jam" Earl two of the best RIOs ever to work with him along with the best squadron training officer he'd ever had LCDR John "Ding" Dong running the day to day training, he could convene a pow-wow with his senior cadre. He would miss seeing the 82 year old Chuck Yeager doing his second flight in the Tomcat simulator, but there were only so many hours in the day and how likely was it that the legend and currently qualified F-16 and F-15 pilot not make the cut?

CDR Joseph "Puke" Richardson, CDR Randolph "Skunk" Scott, and CDR William "Weasel" Waitzel had all served with him and were slotted as squadron COs just as soon as there were enough crews and aircraft. Rat, Toe Jam, and Ding would also get their own squadrons as well. Wing Commander Alistair Peckwyth and Fregattenkapitän Hans Gruber had been picked by their governments as the officers to command one of their country's Tomcat squadrons and The Schnoz had only good things to say about both veteran Tornado pilots and their RIOs.

Master Chief Cletus Borders joined the pow-wow as the senior maintainer. As the men sat down with their warm beverage of choice, the phone rang.

"CAG."

The 72 year old man's face tightened, and he replied to whoever was on the other end "Yes, sir. We'll be wheels up just as soon as those dropships land in the LA area. Thank you sir. Godspeed to us all."

As he hung up, everyone was already rising. "Well guys, it's time for us old geezers to kick some ass. There's three Leopards and a Union de-orbiting for the Port of Los Angeles. The Nimitz is halfway

between Pearl and LA, they'll be shooting jarhead hornies with Mavs for a strike on any pirate mechs and some squid whorenuts with buttrammers to support us. With the Air Force and the local Marine and Navy squadrons also launching, it's going to be zoo up there. The E-3s and Hummers are supposed to keep everyone out of our way, but keep an eye out. Okay that's it, non-standard mission brief over. Let's go suit up."

Ten minutes later ten geriatric Tomcats with sexagenarians, septuagenarians, and a single octogenarian at the controls took off. The other two Tomcats bore the much younger British and German crews.

Thirty-six minutes later it was all over. Of the 24 AIM-54Cs launched at the single ASF four failed to guide properly and self-destructed. The Seydlitz piloted by Emily Hastings of the Fire Brand mercenary company managed to high-G maneuver away from the rest for a time until she came under fire from the Port Royal giving the Phoenix chasing her the opportunity they needed. With her fighter on fire she ejected and became officially the first POW taken in the Second Raid.

Ding and Skunk, Schnoz and Weasel, and Chuck Yeager and Rat would be credited with a third kill each.

USS Port Royal.

Captain Reed smirked as he saw the missiles from his ship and the Tomcats converge and annihilate the offending fighter.

"Chute opening 3 o'clock," reported one of the keen eyed bridge crew. There on the other side of the rapidly clearing fire ball was a white parachute.

"Helm, change course to intercept. Ready security team on deck, I want that pilot alive. Call sickbay to send up a team. Good chance he or she's hurt being that close to the blast." The bridge came alive as the crewmen carried out his order.

Thanks to Cap gentry for the 2nd to last part.

Fort McNair
Washington D.C.
15th November, 2005/3020

The four Mechs of Iron lance climbed out of the Washington Channel and moved towards the meeting point, a parking lot at the northern edge of the installation. A fifth Mech was already waiting for them.

"Took you long enough, Iron."

"Well, sorry to let you wait, Widow. Fall in, we're moving to intercept those Port Krin goons. Interception point is Nav Beta," Staedele answered, accelerating to a speed of roughly 60 kilometers per hour and, in the process, ruining the lawn of what looked to be a sports field. He wondered how well this 'Black Widow' would work together with his lance. Would probably better a better idea to sic her at a single enemy 'Mech and let her do her thing, he reasoned.

"Iron Lead, this is Mountain. The bandits are moving towards the northwest, I repeat, the bandits are moving. Seems like they're after that huge parliament building or whatever it is."

Damn! Now it would become a chase. He hated that. It meant that he wouldn't be able to pick the place to fight.

Then another thought struck him. "Mountain, give me a channel to that local general", he ordered.

Seconds later, a new voice sounded out of his radio: "This is Brigadier General Norwell, United States Army. What do you want."

He doesn't sound happy, Staedele thought.

"This is Major Staedele, Buron Cavalry. What I want, sir, is to ask about the status of the evacuation you are certainly carrying out right now. Are there any civilians around between this naval yard and your parliamentary building?"

"No, the evacuation of that section of the city is already confirmed.

Be advised that we would still like as little damage collateral as possible, Major. We've already had to rebuild the Capitol once this decade and we'd like to avoid a repeat."

"I understand that, sir. But frankly, we are looking here at two units compromised of heavy BattleMechs ripping into each other. There will be damage, and quite a bit of it I'm afraid. That's going to be inevitable."

"Understood, Major. Just do your best to keep the destruction as limited as possible. And Major, I want your infantry to meet up with infantry elements of the National Guards 29th Infantry Division. I will send the meeting location to your communications officer."

"Affirmative, sir. Staedele, out." He switched the channel. "You got that, Mountain?"

"Affirmative," Marie replied, "I'll relay those coordinates to Copper immediately. Be advised, you're 5 minutes to intercept."

"Roger, Mountain."

'Wow, this might actually work just as planned', Staedele thought, while watching at what looked like the beginning of an aerial battle in the skies further east. The next moment, he realized what he just did. Too late.

"Iron Lead, this is Iron 4. The damned left knee-activator just crapped out on me. I'm down to half speed".

Looking at the edge of the screen, Staedele could already see Lemell's Marauder, *Murphy*, fall behind as it started limping. Great! The fight hadn't even started and he was already a Mech short.

"Understood, Iron 4. We'll continue ahead to intercept. Just try to link up with us again as soon as possible."

"Roger, boss."

"Everyone else, continue on to Nav Beta. If we don't stop these guys,

they'll be all over our and our employer's infantry."

Minutes later

North of Navy Yard Station

Washington D.C.

"Oh damnit! Iron, this is Mountain. That Rifleman has begun using our drones for target practice. We only have two of them left! These things were expensive!"

Staedele cursed. "Okay, Mountain, withdraw them. By now we have the bandit's reactor signatures pretty well. At least most of the time."

'God-damn city-fights, all the stuff here creates tons and tons of false contacts', Staedele thought.

He switched to an open frequency. "Port Krin militia, this is the Buron Cavalry. You will immediately shut down your Mechs and surrender to the local authorities. I guarantee that there won't be any harm done to you. Refuse, and you will suffer the consequences."

The answer came fast. "Blow me, asshole!"

Ah well, at least he tried. He switched back to the lance channel.

"Iron 3, Widow, you take the northern flank. Iron 2 and me will go directly at them. Try to-"

"Contact!", Iron 2 yelled. He had spotted a Mech entering the street about 400 meters to the east. "Engaging Marauder."

Staedele was about to answer when several impacts into his Mech's right torso shook him through. He spotted the responsible enemy, a Rifleman, leaving cover directly after the Marauder. Firing a snapshot with one PPC, he narrowly missed the target. Instead, the particle beam struck a building behind the Rifleman, gouging a glassy crater into its facade and penetrating inside. Nedeljko and his Flashman, he saw, had more luck. The Marauder was struck in the left leg by *Flashlight's* Large Lasers, melting a sizeable amount of armor.

Seconds later, the firefight was already over as both pirate machines had taken cover in the side-streets again.

"Iron Lead, one bandit seems to be veering north."

"Damn. Iron 3, Widow, get that bastard before he slams into our boys up north. Iron 2 and me will advance on those guys here and pin them in place", Staedele ordered while taking another pot-shot with his PPC at the Rifleman that was just leaving cover. This time, he was more successful as the bolt slammed right into the target's torso, sending a small stream of molten armor dripping down. "Once you dealt with that runaway, try circling and hitting them in the rear."

"Roger, Lead. Moving north", Miller answered.

Again the Rifleman left the cover to take a shot. A stream of autocannon fire flew into the directions of *Altes Eisen*, but missed the still advancing Mech narrowly and continued down the street, blowing up several parked cars. Staedele answered with both PPCs this time. He began sweating intensely as the repeated use of the heavy energy weapons started heating up his Mech. Both shots hit home, vapourising more of the Rifleman's torso armor and sending it tumbling back into cover.

That should teach him, Staedele thought.

"Iron 3, I've got visual. It's the Arche- OH FUCK!"

Staedele's looked at the edge of the screen, only to see *Hammer* being hit square on by a hailstorm of missiles and laser beams. A few missiles went wide and "only" caused more devastation to the surrounding buildings, but that was a weak consolation. The Mech was shaken by impact after impact, sending fragments of shattered armor flying everywhere, and then toppled over and landed on its belly.

"Iron 3, report in! ... Iron 3, hey, say something!", Nedeljko yelled over the com.

"Iron 3 is down", Widow said. "I don't see any major damage on her Mech, though. I'm getting that asshole in his Archer."

The report that Miller's Mech was still intact was somewhat of a release for Staedele. It meant that she could still be alive.

Then his thoughts were rudely interrupted as the Rifleman popped out of cover for another round.

'Damn, this is annoying', Staedele thought while firing back. 'Aw, fuck it. I have to close in or this will take all day and we'll completely level this street.'

"Iron 2, we gotta close in on these guys or this will go on for all eternity. You take the Marauder, I'll stay with the Rifleman."

Having said that, Staedele accelerated the Warhammer into a run down the street, hoping to reach the next intersection before the Rifleman popped out of cover again.

Inbound from "Motherlode" orbit (400 Kilometers above Africa)
15 November 3020/2005
8:15 AM

"Chuin! The F%*kers NUKED some of those Dammed pricks!"

Shocked pause. The pilot, the mute giant known only as Doe, immediately sent them on a steep dive, heading for 'Motherload'. The moment nukes appeared, the command crew were treated to a sight that was, in their experience, unique. Their Captain, a paragon of serenity under every other circumstance, actually freaked out. For all of 5 seconds, anyway.

"Ahem."

Sigh.

"Ok. Ryu. Happy now?"

"Yes, Nabiki. I am."

Despite relaxed words from Captain 'Ryu' and the ship's Comm's officer, the dropship, Death from Above, was screaming down towards the planet below them. At maximum speed, no less.

"Ah... Cap? Should we tell everybody what's going on? Sir?"

"Ahem."

"Sir? Oh, yeah, Ryu."

The tall asian who commanded the Death from Above looked at the slender blond sensor and weapons officer, noting once again how young she appeared, in her pink, ruffled, dress. That went with the name she chose to be called. Barbie. Then, he remembered what was under that dress, and shuddered.

"No."

"But, Cap-"

"No. We are going to hit dirt, as fast as we can. We are not going to set off the rabble. We are going to let them out, as we were paid to do. Then, and only then, will we say anything about thermonuclear weapons."

Barbie sighed.

"But, then I won't get to hear all their responses!"

Barbie, while new, was shaping up to be quite the annoyance, thought Captain Chuin- Umm, Ryu.

**Inbound from "Motherlode" orbit (200 Kilometers above Africa)
15 November 3020/2005
8:55 AM**

Death from Above, a Union class dropship(Converted for cargo), hurled itself through the atmosphere, the hull glowing with the heat of reentry. It roared down, aiming for the closest bit of ground, totally separated from the other pirate forces. After all, with multi-megaton explosions happening, people start looking for shelter. And right now, that meant the ground.

"Hm."

"Nabiki?" The Captain showed a little interest.

"That's strange."

"What? What's stra- Oh, no, MORE NUKES, WERE ALL GONNA-"

"No, that's not it." This was said by the distracted Nabiki, as the fourth person on the bridge, a massively scarred individual reached over with one hand, the other maintaining the grip needed to pilot, grabbed Barbie, and pinned her down with one hand, somehow

calming her significantly. But, not Chuin, who never liked it when the pilot didn't have his full attention on the task at hand. (Ok. Ryu.)

"Nabiki?" Ryu was almost always calm, but he didn't like thermonuclear weapons pointed at him either.

"Oh, yeah. I'm hearing from the Firejaw. They're being attacked, missile boats, air breathers, that sort of thing. I just find it odd that we're not being attacked. I wonder why?"

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Palace of President Kabila

15 November 3020/2005

10:15 AM

"General. Tell me, what can our air forces do about that... Monster. Assuming that the Americans did not lie"-The word Americans was pronounced with a truly massive amount of venom-"then we will have problems with them."

"Bah. Americans. We have the best equipment that the Soviets can provide, and a very large army. We will be fine." The General would look downright odd to western eyes. After all, he was wearing a neon pink and green camo outfit, with what appeared to be a strange feathered WW1 German helmet. In royal purple, no less.

"And our planes?"

"They are being scrambled now. They will be in the air in minutes."

"Good. Good. Soon, we will have this bunch of pirates at our mercy. Then, we will see what we will see."

As the dropship Death from Above came in for a rough, but fast, landing, a communication was being sent to the only first world troops in the area.

Democratic Republic of the Congo
20 Kilometers north of Kinshasa
UN Peacekeeping Force Encampment.
15 November 3020/2005
10:35 AM

Colonel William Thatcher, Commander of the local UN Peacekeeping Force, did what he did every day. Drink a little wine, read a proper 'classic', and listen to Mozart. This was in part because he had skilled people working for him, part because he was lazy, and in part because every other person in his encampment was from either Australia or New Zealand. And, no, none of them did speak Dutch. (Nor did he speak english. Eh, the UN. What'cha gonna do?).

He looked up, hearing a distant sound of roaring thunder, but more importantly, the sounds of somebody entering his tent. Honestly, that didn't happen very often.

"Sir?" Dutch. The Sergeant spoke Dutch.

"When the bleeding hell did you know Dutch, and why didn't you tell me!"

"You didn't ask, Sir. Now, we have more important things to deal with. You have a call over Sat-com, apparently somebody's noticed we're the closest to one of those space pirates."

"Space PIRATES! You mean those are REAL!" Shock was clear in his voice.

The Sergeant simply lead his CO outside, and pointed off towards the horizon, where a metal egg was landing on a pillar of white fire, something like 30 Kilometers away.

There was a large amount of swearing from said CO.

It should be pointed out, that this particular part of Africa was a mite unstable. There was 5 different army's fighting each other, and none of them were nice to the locals(Inc. the National one). Then there

was the fact that for all of 2 and a half million men were part of the various different army's, only 7 units could be said to have the competence and discipline of a first world military. The rest were thugs with guns and uniforms.

The 7 groups? Well, one was the President's personal guard. The local Elite, better equiped and trained than the rest of the army. This, admittedly, put them at the same quality as regular troops in the first world, but that was as far as they went. Higher level equipment, less quality maintance, that sort of thing. Still, they wouldn't get involved unless the President himself was attacked.

After that, there was 4 different merc groups, all of which were running training encampments for different groups, one that provided the President's personal guard. The rest were training other army's.

Then, there were the UN Peacekeeping Force. 150 combat troops, tasked with keeping the peace in a country one fifth of the size of the US, having only 5 patrols of 20 men to do so. (Incidently, within 100 Kilometers of their encampment, there was a 60% decrease in Murder, Rape, and other thugery. Quality Troops, at least in comarison, had an effect.) With recent event's, they were feeling a mite over worked.

And, the newest group with discipline was on the dropship, just about to disembark. They held, over every thing else, the tech and firepower advantage.

Democratic Republic of the Congo
20 Kilometers West of Kinshasa
Death From Above Landing Zone
15 November 3020/2005
10:40 AM

On a pillar of fusion flame, the huge egg landed. At that very moment, the 30 MiG-21's of the Congo Air Force flashed by, so shocked at its enormous bulk they forgot to attack. Two of them were ripped apart by laser fire from the dropship as they flew past. The

MiG's turned around, now more angry than stunned, and salvoed missiles in to it. 56 air-to-air missiles, set to proximity detonation, exploded around the opening ship, sending a large volume of shrapnel in all directions.

Unfortunatly for the MiG's, this had no effect on the armored Death From Above. It did, however, have some effect on some of the scum who were next to the opening door. The early bird may get the worm, but the early pirate seems to get the shrapnel. The lasers fired again, unimpressed with the missiles, and gutted 2 more MiG's. The rest evaluated the situation, and performed a tactical retreat (Otherwise known as a Brown Pants Moment) and the pirates began disembarking.

A motley horde of over 400 thugs and psychotics surged out, about half on motor bikes, and the other half in random trucks, roughly half of which had some form of makeshift armor. The rejected extras from Mad Max headed for the nearby city at high speed.

Moments later, a pair of mechs charged down the ramp, and followed the pack. The Locust, by far the faster, accelerated away, leaving the Urbanmech in its dust.

30 seconds after the last stragglers left, a trio of tanks appeared, and left in a coordinated group. The 2 Galleon light tanks lead, covering the Heavy Tracked APC, as they, too headed for the nearby city of Kinshasa.

Silence reigned, as the crew on the Death From Above hosed out the cargo bay, and their Captain considered what to do next.

Democratic Republic of the Congo
20 Kilometers north of Kinshasa
UN Peacekeeping Force Encampment.
15 November 3020/2005
10:43AM

"Sir. We have orders to reconnoiter the pirates. They'll send heavy

units to deal with them later." This was immediately translated by the Sergeant into Dutch, and the reply back to English a moment later.

"Right, recall all patrols, and send one of the guard platoons over to see what's going on. Observe, note available forces, guards, etc."

The Sergeant spoke up.

"Can the men take advantage of situations as they arise?"

"Yes, they can. Intel, first, but after that....."

Not 10 minutes later, a UN APC left the encampment at reasonably high speed.

Democratic Republic of the Congo
10 Kilometers West of Kinshasa
The Napoleon Road
15 November 3020/2005
11:15 AM

Not 10 Kilometers from the dropship was a road. A typical muddy mess, going North-South, with the pirates heading East. It was just luck that as the lead elements (Motorbikes, all) came over the slight ridge to see it, they also saw a vehicle on it. It was a 6 wheeled APC, painted light blue, moving North at a relaxed 25 Kmph. The the driver spotted the pirates, and accelerated heavily. About 15 of the bikers peeled of, giving chase.

"Lieutenant! Some of those psychos are on our tail! Can't we shoot them?!"

"No, Red. Not until"-Spang!-"Yep, get on the 50 Cal! Fuckers gotta die!"

"Right, gotta let them shoot at us first, hope we live-" Hurnn, he groaned, lifting the armored lid-"then, and only-SHIT, BRAKE RIGHT!!!"

The entire APC shrieked at the sudden stress, being on 3 wheels for a few seconds. That coincided with a white trail of smoke going past, close enough to touch. That trail ended with a tree, turning it into instant splinters.

"Right, fuckers gotta die" K-chunk, the machine gun was active, and Red began to fire back.

At first, his aim was a little rough, but as he got into the swing of things, that improved. He swept across their attackers, hitting only one of them, but that one's bike took out 2 more. Then, as he was about to sweep back across them, one of the pirates got a lucky shot in return. With a Spang!, Corporal Bruce "Red" Blue, went down, collapsing into the APC. His helmet may have saved his life, but he wasn't going to be doing much.

"Shit on a stick!" The Lieutenant caught the descending trooper. He glanced up, looked at a particular trooper, and spoke.

"Right, your turn. I want them dead."

"Yes, SIR!" That individual, looked positively gleeful, as the big Maori swarmed up the ladder, grabbing the triggers, and opening fire with a maniacal laugh.

The 50 Cal hosed down the entire pack of pirates, hitting 4 of them, before a bullet hitting the 5th had an unexpected effect. It was a lucky blow, slipping through the gas tank, before hitting the riders satchel charge. It went up with a massive BOOM, and with it went all bar one of the pirates.

The last biker, in a move worthy of any movie, did a perfect jump through the flames, long coat and hair flying in the wind. This impressed Corporal Strider Cooktown (the Maori gunner) enough to take in the remaining details before he did anything else. That allowed him to notice the fact that she was clad in only a bikini and heavy boots under her overcoat. Couple that with a face only a mother pitbull could love, and, well, you get the idea.

She landed perfectly, both accelerating and pulling out a machete as she came. She had already closed to a point where Strider couldn't

get her with the 50 Cal by the time he got over his awe. He blinked, noticing her position.

"Jackson! Brakes, Now!"

Screech! Crunch. 'tinkle, tinkle'.

"Lieutenant! Their all down, Sir."

"Good. Henderson?"

"Red has a concussion and some bruising, Sir. That's all."

"Good. Still, we'll want one of THEM. For intel, you understand."

"Yes Sir."

Henderson, the 'big-boned' medic, walked to the back door of the APC, and opened the rear hatch. Then looked down, at the insensate woman on the ground right there. Then, he sighed, rolled his eyes, made sure she was alive (much the same condition as the fallen Red), before hauling her into the UN APC. The Lieutenant spoke without looking up.

"Right, secure the prisoner. Jackson! Get us back to base!"

The woman was secured, and the troops spent the rest of the trip back wondering about the nut who wore a bikini and long coat into battle.

Democratic Republic of the Congo
10 Kilometers South/West of Kinshasa
1st National DRC army base.
15 November 3020/2005
10:50AM

Meanwhile, at the nearby D.(emocratic) R.(epublic) of the C.(ongo) army base, the troops were being mustered. They were being sent

out, in 'patrols' of 100 men, with their usual mix of ex-Soviet equipment, mostly AK47's and RPG7's.

One such bunch, was the 33rd infantry, commanded by Te Than, a local with hunting experience. He immediately loaded his troops into transport (Trucks) and set out for a position he knew of, a perfect spot for an ambush.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

7 Kilometers West of Kinshasa

The 'Spartan' Pass.

15 November 3020/2005

11:30AM

The pirate horde, while lacking a few frontrunners, continued it's motley charge. They got a bit lost in a small forest, before clearing through, veering to the left, to get at a bit of a pass. There were 2 to 4 metre ridges stretching for several kilometers on each side, after all.

The bikes, showing their advantage in speed and mobility, got through first, preceding the trucks by a good 10 minutes. Mostly, anyway.

A bare minute after most of the bikie pirates had passed through, a group of DRC army trucks roared up, slammed to a halt, and men spilled out of them as their officers began giving orders before the trucks had all stopped.

"Right! Group 1, over there, behind that tree and ridge. Group 2, follow me!"

A Huzzah!, and they went. Group 2 was in cover within 2 minutes, but Group 1 had only 20 of it's 50 men on the far side before a pair of bikes appeared at the mouth of the pass. The bikes, noticing over 20 men, chose discretion over valor, and turned around. This gave the remaining men an extra minute to get under cover before heavier vehicles turned up.

Lead by a large improvised APC, the 15 trucks , with a 12 motorbike

escort, entered the pass.

The DRC unit, under the steady command of Than, waited for the signal. Well, until one of the guys with RPG7's lost his nerve, and fired at the lead truck. This set off a full assault by all the ambushing troops. They leapt up, and opened up with grenades, assault rifles, and a total of 9 other RPG7's (their entire supply). The results, on the unprepared pirates, was rather rough.

Within 30 seconds the front truck was reduced to a pile of flaming scrap, and the 12 bikers was turned into 1 biker. There were explosions left and right, shrapnel flew, and pirates died. But, this didn't put them out of the fight yet.

There was sporadic counter-fire, gaining in regularity, before the explosives began flying the other way. As it was, within those 30 seconds, the DRC troops had used most of their ammo, and began to retreat, or melt under the massive return fire.

The remaining army troops vanished into the nearby woods, and the pirates, their blood up for hunting civies, not the dangerous militia types, headed for the city. They'd have the advantage there!

Not 5 minutes later, the remaining troops emerged from hiding, noting that the pirates had left all their fallen behind. The remaining 62 men moved out to their previous positions, looking in on their wounded and dead. As it happened, all but 5 of the casualties were victims of heavy weapons, and you'd need a scraper to pick them up. The others? Well, the medics loaded them into trucks, and made preparations to get them to hospital.

Meanwhile, the rest of the 33rd descended into the pass, to make sure that all the enemy were dead. While there was 2 gunfights, with survivors objecting to their execution, there was a pair of lady pirates who survived as well. That was the end of 84 men and women, 11 motorcycles, and 3 trucks, one of which was sort of armored. (As it happened, the armor survived! But, the first hit knocked it off the vehicle in question, and the second.....)

With that, the victorious 33rd left, with wounded and new slaves to

celebrate about!

Democratic Republic of the Congo
7 Kilometers West of Kinshasa
1 Kilometer North of The 'Spartan' Pass.
15 November 3020/2005
11:30AM

Cameron Liao (No relation) was a Mechwarrior, and the pilot of his very own Locust! Fine, it's not the largest of mechs. Still, it's his.

"So, Death From Above, what's the word?" The Locust was moving at near maximum speed towards the nearby city. The response was what him pause to consider if he really should be doing this.

"Locust, the word is Nukes."

"What!?"

As the Locust came to a screaming halt, Cameron had a moment where his brain simply-did-not-work. After 30 seconds of reboot, he felt capable of going on.

"Ah, Death From Above? What was that? I'm not sure I copied correctly."

"No, you heard right. Roughly half of the Band of the Dammed were Nuked in orbit."

"Well, fuc"-Th-wack! What the hell?!

Cameron looked down, only to note a bunch of infantry in a truck of some kind. One of them held a smoking tube, and 3 others were pointing others his way. He hosed them down with his machine guns, obliterating them all.

But not before they got off another 2 shots, one he dodged, but the other hit, not that it did much. Huh. Light weapons around here, he thought to himself, as he bought the Locust up to a leisurely 40 Kph,

searching for more PBI to kill. He always liked it when they went squish.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

5 Kilometers West of Kinshasa

15 November 3020/2005

11:45AM

Colonel James Valentine was the pilot of the Urbanmech, a slow, steady mech for a slow, steady guy. He wasn't fond of haste, but he always got there in the end. Him and his Urby, against the Universe! Right now, he was heading toward a city, his chosen environment! So, he was somewhat happy. Now, if only these damn PBI's would stop firing those pathetic rockets at him, he mused, triggering his small laser into their transport. That went up with a Bang! and he moved on at his maximum speed, ignoring things like trees and infantry as he smashed through. After all, it wasn't like they could hurt him.

At the same time
Burrito Brothers
Intersection Independence Ave SE/2n St SE
Washington D.C.
15th November, 2005/3020

"I understand, sir... Yes, sir... Yes, sir... out."

1st Lieutenant Dennis Barba wondered just how much wierder the day could get. First he was ordered to deploy directly south of the Capitol to build up a line of defense against the raiders that had landed to the south, then most of the 29th's assets got stuck in the waves of civilians fleeing from the inner city, leaving him with just two platoons (and him having seniority by about a month... damn!). Of course, it was not as if he was alone with that. Nobody had expected enemy forces to land to the southwest, let alone inside the city and thus most of the defenders found themselves in completely wrong positions while being unable to relocate as the streets were chocked by panicking civilians. And now this.

"Sergeant Delgado! Lieutenant Nowlin!" he yelled. Seconds later, William Delgado, his platoon sergeant, as well as Ryan Nowlin, the CO of "his" second platoon had come over to his position in the ground floor of the building.

"Sir?"

"News from battalion command. As if this day couldn't get any more confusing. Apparently our uninvited guests brought some mercenaries with them. And those mercenaries weren't told the little detail that we'd be using nukes. Some of them considered that a breach of contract and the President took the chance and immediately hired them to help us."

This drew more than a bit of a surprised look from the two Guardsmen.

"Wait, it gets even better. These guys landed at Reagan and while their Mechs are engaging the pirate Mechs about a klick south-" just

to underline him, a series of explosions could be heard from the south, "they're sending two platoons of motorized infantry to reinforce us. So please, tell second platoon that, if they see some guys that are definitely not ours rolling down the Independence Avenue, they shouldn't just open fire, but try to-"

"Lieutenant, 2nd platoon is reporting a column of vehicles moving down Independence. They say that those are by no chance ours. They're asking for clearance to engage." his radioman reported.

"Denied! Tell them to hold the guys and establish contact with them. I'm coming over." Saying that, Barba grabbed his M4 and ran out the front door, Delgado and Nowlin following directly behind him. He sprinted across 2nd street and entered the James Madison Memorial Building, making way to its northwestern corner, encountering various soldiers preparing defensive positions on his way. All of them were wearing a somewhat confused expression.

The platoon Sergeant of second, Sergeant Leming, was already waiting, accompanied by a man in grey-black urban camouflage, wearing a ballistic vest and a helmet and carrying both an unfamiliar, blocky rifle and what was without doubt a rocket launcher over his shoulder. Walking over to them, Barba saw a unit patch on the stranger's shoulder, some kind of emblem inside a light blue circle. He also got a glance of what looked like a helmet-mounted radio.

"First Lieutenant Dennis Barba, Virginia National Guard", he introduced himself. The stranger took his outstretched hand. "Lieutenant Marc Johnson, Buron Cavalry. Nice to meet you," the man replied with a serious voice. He gestured Barba to follow him to the window. "My men and me have been ordered to help you hold this area against any pirates that break through from the south. For the time, we are under your command", he told, without any apparent emotion in the sentence.

Barba looked out of the Window, seeing about 50 or so other soldiers wearing the same uniform as this man. They were busy unloading equipment from a series of light vehicles that looked a lot like those SOVs he knew some spec ops units used. All of them carried the same

rifle as the man besides him, some with an underlung grenade launcher, save for a few that had something shouldered that was without a doubt a machinegun, though it looked a bit bigger than his men's SAWs. But what immediately caught his eye was that almost every single one of these troopers was carrying the same kind of rocket launchers as Lieutenant Johnson. That was more anti-tank firepower these 2 platoons were carrying as that of an entire 1st world infantry company!

"Your men are packing quite a lot of heat, Lieutenant", he remarked.

"Aye, sir. We'll need it in case one of the pirate Mechs breaks through. For that case, sir, I would also advise to rig one or two buildings down the street for a controlled demoliton, so that we can collapse them onto a Mech coming down the street."

What the-? "You really think that's necessary, Lieutenant?", Barba asked with a sceptical voice.

"Sir, if my intel is correct, those are heavy Battlomechs down there. Even with all the LAWs my men are packing it will need a minor miracle to stop a Heavy Mech that is still in a combat-worthy condition. In the same vein, I would advise you to not dig in too much. The best chance for poor bloody infantrymen such as us when taking on Mechs is to shoot and scoot. And quite a few Mech-jocks will take to devastate the entire facade of the building from which they were shot at. Consequently, it'd also be smart to stay on the ground floor."

That caused Barba to wonder. How tough were these things actually? He had heard about ome of the Mechs to the south shrugging off fire from a couple M1s, but he never suspected them to be like THAT. Suddenly, he was way less confident in the ability of his Javelins to actually do the job.

"Alright, Lieutenant. I think I will heed your advice. You ought to have a bit more experience in this, after all. Now, would you please position your men in the building over the street to the east. Your engineers can rig a building down the street, just tell us which one you picked." Something caught Barbas eye. "What's that packet all

your people are carrying on the back of their belts?"

"That, sir?", Johnson picked the package from his back. "That's a magnetic satchel charge for anti-mech attacks, sir."

"Ah, okay", was all that came into Barba's mind. Magnetic charges? Who the hell were these guys? They couldn't seriously think about charging a Mech with these things, could they? Tactics like that hadn't been used since WWII!

"Thanks, Lieutenant. That's all for now. Bring your men in position."

"Aye, sir." Johnson answered, wondering why this local Lieutenant was looking at him like that. Meanwhile, the sounds of battle to the south were growing louder.

Vicinity of Augustdorf
North-West Germany
Earth
14 November 2005

Today just wasn't her day, mechwarrior Joan decided.

First she had been forced to stay put in her mech while the Dropship ran a goddamn nuke gauntlet. The knowledge that she was entirely unable to do anything besides wait and hope for the best, and that her chances for survival were determined simply by random chance rather than skill and courage was humiliating for any mechwarrior.

They had made it in the end... barely. Grievously wounded by first a nuclear proximity detonation and then conventional missile attacks, the dropship had crash-landed quite badly.

They'd made it out as quickly as possible in their mechs, the dropship's crew desperately trying to put out the fires or at least stop them from reaching ammunition storage. They were marooned in the middle of enemy territory without backup, they were being observed by a dozen atmospheric aircraft from beyond weapon range, and now those idiots...

"I don't care! We were here first! Fuck off, you Dark Wing pussies!"

How stupid can you be, really?

"I don't care about 'the loot'. Look, we're totally isolated here and there's air breathers all over the place. We need to..."

"Blah, blah, blah. Ohhh, look at me, I'm a Dark Emo mechwarrior! I'm so much better than everyone else, but I'm scared of a bit of shit-eating neobarb militia. Help! Help!"

Joan could see the other damned Damned pricks laughing in their mechs cockpits. The leader now aimed his primary weapons at Joan's *Commando*. Could those idiots possibly be any stu.... wait, what was that? It was still multiple kilometers away, but closing fast... Joan

zoomed in using the cockpit's telescopic sight systems...

Holy Shit!

"Break! Everone break and after me now!"

That was ***a lot*** of tanks!

Joan's lance was quick to follow her orders, and it didn't come one moment to soon. The opposing recon lance of the Band of the Damned had barely started laughing about the "whiny Darkies" running away when each of them was hit by what must have been dozens of anti-tanks rounds. Mere fractions of a second later the whole area erupted into explosions as it was hit by something that felt like an entire artillery battalion bombarding.

Joan barely kept her mech from stumbling as the shock waves swept over it. A quick look at her radar told her that the air breathers apparently weren't content anymore with just watching them, and were now also closing in fast. To make things worse, she noticed that one of her lance's mechs was missing.

She silently cursed Colonel Sanders for bringing them on this fool's errand, and kept running.

Interior of a Leopard 2 tank

Near Augustdorf

North-West Germany

Earth

14 November 2005

'BANG!'

The entire tank briefly shock with the recoil, as its main gun send another shell into the enemy mech 5 kilometers away, all while the tank was advancing at full speed. This time the target, even as insanely tough as it was, couldn't take the brutal punishment anymore and something critical in the left leg broke, sending mech and mechwarrior to the ground. Only 4 of the 8 enemy mechs were

still standing, 3 of them fleeing as fast as their mechanical feet could propel them. The tank and its companions wasted no time in pursuing.

They were winning, there was no doubt about that. What little enemy fire had been directed at Panzerbataillon 203 so far had missed by a wide margin, its originators reeling under the hammering blows of an entire battalion of tanks and the constant bombardment by another battalion of self-propelled artillery.

Even so, the tank's commander couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to face an enemy like that at anything approaching numerical parity.

Secret Command Bunker
Washington DC, United States of America
Earth
15 November 2005

"The nukes broke them."

"What? I'm sorry, General McMayers, could you repeat that?" Ryan was tired. Ever since the invasion started he'd been awake, feeling the frantic need to do *something*, even though intellectually he knew there wasn't much he *could* do except wait and wish the military good luck.

"The nukes broke them. We didn't get that many, but what really matters is that we scattered them. Of the three major groups, only one seems to have had any kind of coordination to begin with, and once they realized we were firing nukes at them they panicked and broke up into many small groups or even singular dropships on their own. There's only a handful of what one could call major concentrations, and even those are typically outnumbered at least 5 to 1 by local forces. We're already receiving reports from Europe and Asia that the enemy has begun to surrender, and we've confirmation of at least 3 dropships captured in flightworthy condition."

"Well, that's good news, isn't it? The way this is going so far we

certainly seem to be winning, though some of the casualty reports are uglier than I'd hoped." Ryan frowned at that... he knew they'd gotten off far easier than they could have, but every time he heard something like "estimate 10% allied force depletion" he felt a stab of both anger and sorrow in his hearth.

"True." McMayers just nodded grimly. "But it could have been much uglier still. Heck, it's going to be much uglier. The outcome may no longer be in doubt, but this isn't over yet. And if we're ever forced to go up against a more competent enemy equipped like that with what we have now, it's going to be ugly on a scale I don't even want to think about."

**K Street SE, southeast of Garfield Park
Washington D.C.
15th November, 2005/3020**

The fight was nearing its end. Staedele closed in on the heavily battered Rifleman, firing his medium lasers and SRM. The salvo yet again hit the militia Mech center mass, reducing the already weakened armor protection even more. Staedele gasped. He had brought *Altes Eisen* almost to the limit in his attempt to take the enemy Mech out as fast as possible. The shutdown alert started blaring, prompting him to hit the override button.

The Rifleman tried firing back, but shaken by the repeated hits as it was, it only managed to ruin the surrounding buildings even more.

And then Staedele saw what he was looking for. He aimed at a specific point on the Riflemans torso and hit the triggers for both PPCs in rapid succession. A new heat wave rolled through the Mech, forcing him again to hit the override. But the gamble had paid off.

Staedele had seen a small spot on the Riflemans torso on which the internal skeleton was already visible. His first PPC shot hit this little hole and enlarged it by a good margin. And then the second particle beam hit home and flew through this breach, deep into the Riflemans internals. The entire Mech shuddered, began to stagger like a drunken man and fell on its left side.

'Gyro damage', part of Staedeles mind thought. 'This fight is over.'

The pilot of the Rifleman evidently didn't think so. He triggered his still working autocannon in the Mechs right arm, punching several craters into the right leg of the Warhammer.

"Oh no you don't!" Staedele murmured. He took careful aim and sent another PPC blast into the opening on the Rifleman's torso.

The fusion reactor powering a Battlemech was the most heavily protected part of the entire Mech. Even after putting it behind the traditionally heaviest armor facing, the engineers designing it

decided to install several layers of shielding. This shielding, while very thin, was made out of the same materials as the armor of a Mech and could very well take a direct hit from an RPG-7. Against the sheer fury and force of a PPC blast, however, it might as well haven't been there. The man-made lightning cut through it effortlessly and continued on, hitting the primary magnetic containment. Registering the damage, the computer program controlling the reactor carried out its emergency routine and immediately shut the reactor down. The Rifleman simply stopped moving as all systems went offline and rolled over on its back.

"This is Iron Lead, Rifleman down."

Staedele took a look at the sensor. He couldn't see much from the fight up north due to all the ghost signals, but he did see that Iron 2 was equally about to finish off his enemy. Now he- 'Hey, wait a second. Where's the fourth one?' Staedele wondered.

As if to answer the question, the facade of a small building just 30 meters down the street from the position of *Altes Eisen* erupted outwards and the Crusader stepped out onto the street, immediately turning towards the Warhammer and taking on speed.

'Oh great', Staedele thought while triggering the medium lasers and SRM. Only one of the lasers and half the SRM hit home, though, and the Crusader simply shrugged off the hits and continued the assault, answering with its own SRM. Staedele held to his seat as the missiles impacted all over his Mech, blasting off more armor.

And then the Crusader ran into him, ramming him at a speed just short of 60 kilometers per hour. It was a sound not unlike a crashing train. *Altes Eisen* was literally thrown backwards and Staedele was almost unable to keep his footing. The Crusader, smelling blood, followed up with a punch that hit the Warhammers right shoulder with a mighty crunch. Again the Mech stumbled backwards, but this time, Murphy struck. Just as Staedele was about to regain his footing, his left foot stomped onto a parked car and began to slip. He lost control. His Mech stumbled backwards and crashed into one of the buildings lining the street, ending up leaning against the partly deformed, partly crushed facade.

The Crusader, pressing its sudden advantage, moved in. Staedele fired his medium lasers and the right PPC. Both lasers sheared some more armor off the Crusaders torso, but that didn't even slow down the 65-ton Mech. The PPC went wide and hit the upper floors of one of the big buildings close to that parliament or whatever it was. The Crusader, now directly in front of him, raised its arm and let it fall like a guillotine, directly aimed at the cockpit of *Altes Eisen*.

"OH SHIIIII-"

It was as if god himself had picked up a sledgehammer and decided to take it to his Mech. Staedele was thrown around as if in a rollercoaster and the sound of the impact battered his ears. And then... silence. Silence and headaches. 'Huh', he thought. 'If I have headaches, that means I'm still alive.'

He opened his eyes, looking upwards. The sky was full of contrails. He even thought that he could see a few planes. Shaking his head, he looked for the Crusader. It was still standing right there, in front of his Mech. 'He must've hit only the side of my head', Staedele thought, still feeling groggy. 'But why?' Looking at the enemy Mechs head, he understood. The Crusaders head was *gone*. Only a couple of burnt, ragged pieces of junk marked the place where it had been connected to the torso just seconds ago.

Staedele looked down the road. About 1200 meters further west, in a small park, stood a Marauder with the hand of death, aces and eights, painted on its right torso, the arm-mounted PPCs still smoking.

"Thanks, Iron 4", he called into the radio while he felt the adrenaline slowly ebbing down.

"You're welcome, Lead. Sorry for being late. And thanks for making that wanker stand still." Lemell answered out of the cockpit of his Marauder, *Murphy*.

"Iron 2 here, the Marauder is down. Took the ejection seat, he's coming down somewhere east."

"Good work, Iron 2, we're finished with the Crusader over here, too",

Staedele replied while bringing his Mech back on his feed and starting to move northwards. "Let's look how Widow does."

Just seconds later, a massive explosion further north answered his question. Every still intact window on the houses around him shattered.

"This is Black Widow. The Archer is down. Ammo explosion. The guy didn't punch out."

"Okay. That's all targets accounted for. Anyone has an idea about Iron 3?"

"None, boss", Nedeljko answered. "I'm closing in on her position."

And then, Staedele heard something:

"Ohhhhhhhhh, ouch."

"Iron 3, is that you? Do you read me?"

"Yeah, boss, I read you. Oohhhh. Hit my head when the fucker brought me down. How long was I gone? And what's the status?", Miller asked.

"You were out for a good ten minutes. We just took care of the last of these militia goons." Staedele answered, his voice betraying relief.

"Oh, good. I think I have a concussion. I'm about to pass out again." And then the contact broke off. Staedele couldn't but grin. He knew Miller good enough by now to know that she wouldn't stay down long just because of such a "scratch".

"Mountain, this is Iron Lead. Inform the locals that we have taken care of their Mech-related problems. Tell them that they should send a medic over here. And ask them to bring some heavy hauling equipment. That Rifleman lies directly on its cockpit hatch, so we need to lift it to get the pilot. Oh, and tell them to pick up the guy from that Marauder. His seat came down somewhere further east."

"Aye, Iron Lead. Copper is reporting that they ambushed a bunch of Port Krin infantry just short of the parliamentary building. They took about two dozen prisoners and have suffered 3 WIA themselves. The locals already have a few medics up there, helping them. Oh, and we got word that they finally shot down the last of the ASF blocking

their air power."

"Good. Tell everyone 'good work'. Iron Lead, out."

Staedele checked his unit. His own Mech had suffered armor damage all around and the right shoulder activator was jammed due to the punch. Ammo was down to 70 percent. *Flashlight* had come out less damaged, with only some armor being molten off. Lemell's Marauder was still limping but otherwise intact. And the Black Knight had lost a lot of armor on the frontal aspect, but not much more. 'Phew', he thought, 'we came out of that one pretty well'.

The area around him, not so much. It well and truly looked like a warzone. Building facades were cratered and blown open, cars had been smashed underfoot or torn to shreds by stray weapons fire and glassy scars were scattered all over the place. He'd have to contact General Norwell and tell him to send some firefighters or else the fires in a few of these buildings could very well spread out.

"Okay, Iron Lance, form up. Seems like we won this. Let's wait for the medic to take care of Iron 3 and then go home." 'Just another day on the job', he thought.

Author's note: Yep, that was the James Madison Memorial Building that just got one or two new ventilation holes due to the PPC-miss.

Dropship *Jalaal*
Middle of the Desert
Planet Motherload
14 November, 3020

Mullah Aladdin Al Azim knelt in prayer before his battered Thunderbolt. While his words carried his love of almighty Allah, he was ashamed to say that his mind was too busy shooting off in other directions. They had narrowly avoided thermonuclear destruction and their Leopard dropship had been forced from the sky by damage to one of their stabilizers. Like all of his men, he was Azami, a former member of the Arkab janissary Legions. Silently he wondered if this world was Allah's punishment for him and his men for turning to banditry to support their ongoing insurrection against the infidel Kurita. If it was, he'd accept his punishment for his piracy as a man.

He knew it was wrong, but had little other choice. The power of the hated Dragon was but insurmountable and it was only by the boundless mercies of God that he and his men still drew breath. They needed arms and supplies with which to war upon the hated oppressor and as rogues they were unable to work lawfully as mercenaries. Still, he tried to be godly even as he committed sin after sin. He would not raise arms against the faithful except in his own defense, he showed lenience to the people of the book, and even against infidels he refused to shed needless blood or take more than they could afford to lose. Even still it disgusted him to the point he could not even gaze upon the worlds they stole from without feeling almighty god's disappointment upon his shoulders.

Still though, he found himself kneeling before God, facing a city long destroyed by the Hated Incarnation of Satan, Aramis, pleading for mercy that neither he nor his men truly deserved. It was almost enough to make a man abandon his faith, but he was as much a student of history as he was of the Holy Koran. He knew that the daring and the patient would succeed in the end against the thoughtless and arrogant. He also had to wonder if this world was a test and not a punishment. Was nightmare world God's way of testing their faith, and if so, what did almighty god wish of them?

Looking to the roof he could but ask for a sign.

"Excuse me, Mullah," he heard from behind him.

"What is it Wasif?" he asked his leader of infantry. "I asked not to be disturbed."

"We encountered a group of men coming to assault the Dropship."

"Are they slain?" he asked.

"Yes, to a man."

"Then why do you interrupt my prayers?"

Wasif swallowed and the clergyman could all but hear his body tremble. "Before the last of them passed on, we were able to interrogate him. They were Muslim."

The mullah turned about with wild eyes. "What?"

"They were of the faithful. This is a world inhabited by the faithful," he clenched his fist. "Vorax has betrayed us."

Aladdin closed his eyes as tears of sorrow and rage made their way down his face. "Thank you, friend. I wish to be alone."

"No, you don't understand, it gets worse."

His eyes opened and his face flushed with rage. "We have been tricked into breaking an oath we'd sworn upon the names of our fathers to Almighty God himself. What could be any worse?"

The infantryman gulped and stepped back in the face of his leader's towering rage. "Before he died, the man claimed that he was fighting Jihad against us. He swore in god's own name that this world is Earth and that Holy Mecca was under attack. I told him it had been destroyed centuries ago, but he said it was under assault now."

"What?" Aladdin was confused. He would discount nothing sworn in

god's name off hand, but that was hard to believe. "Show me a map of this world."

He nodded and the two of them walked to a screen set in the wall. In an instant he felt as if he were about to vomit. Their location according to the charts and images gathered by his own ship was in north Africa, in the middle of the great Sahara Desert. To the east was holy mecca, and it was marked as the location of one of the targets being claimed by one of Vorax's own men.

"He told us the truth," the holy man hissed. "Tell the captain that we must move immediately... and send a message to the locals."

"Without hesitation. What shall it say?"

"We are the Free Azami Army. We have been tricked into attacking this world, but we have heard the cries of the faithful and we stand ready to serve as the sword of Allah. We shall descend upon the infidels who dare bring violence to the city of the prophet. Our lives are now meaningless, we exist only to bring them to God's justice. We fight as Mujahideen."

15 November, 2005
Dark Wing Dropship Phantom Wing
Earth Orbit

Major James Brown swore loudly as the only Overlord dropship in the fleet passed through the fringe of a nuclear fireball.

"The Motherloaders have nukes!" One of the technicians screamed.

Brown turned back to look at the rest of the stunned crew on the bridge. A glance showed that they were shaken and panicked by the unexpected attack. The Major took a couple of steps toward the Captain of the dropship and grabbed him, dragging his attention back to the ship and away from the shock which paralyzed him.

"Get us down to the planet's surface as fast as you can, and do it before they hit US with a nuke!" He ordered.

"Sir," the Captain asked , "What about the planned landing zones? Colonel Sanders ordered all our ships to stay together."

"To hell with the planned landing zones, survival is more important." The Major retorted. "Colonel Sanders will understand that the preservation of our forces is more important than hanging around in orbit and waiting to be nuked. If following a plan for the entire unit to land together causes us to stay in orbit one second longer than we need to, then forget the plan get us down to the planet at once."

"But where should we land, Sir?" The Captain asked.

"I don't care." The Major replied. "So long as it is close enough to a large city that they won't dare nuke us, and it has clear fire zones around the landing area. I'm getting the feeling that this isn't going to be as easy as be thought. If they have nukes in orbit, who knows what else may be waiting for us on the ground."

NORAD
United States

Earth

"General Matthews", one of the Watch Officers called. "We're receiving updated tracking data, it looks like several dropships will be landing within the Continental United States. However, most of them appear to be on vectors that spread them from Europe to Asia, and there seems to be the possibility of several landings in Latin America & Africa.

The General studied several of the main screens thoughtfully, a semi-organized rush towards Earth had devolved into all-out chaos as every dropship in orbit began scatter and head towards the ground as fast as they could. As he watched the screens he could see large circles denoting landing probability appearing over portions of the earth as the descent paths of each dropship was calculated.

He turned to a Major standing nearby, "Once we're sure where the ships will land, I want you to begin vectoring units from unthreatened areas to the probable landing zones."

As he glanced back at the main screens he could see the circles showing the landing probability areas slowly shrunk as descent paths were recalculated. And although they do not have any firm information on where the ships would land, it was already obvious that they would have landings somewhere on the East and West coasts and around the Great Lakes region.

"Notify the Commands in those regions that they will be receiving guests, and to layout the welcome mat." The General said. "And begin issuing the orders for units surrounding the affected areas to begin reinforcement of the probable landing zones.

It took several minutes for the orders to go out and the confirmations that the units surrounding the probable landing zones were beginning to move. That time was all it took for the descent path of one of the dropship's to be recalculated with higher accuracy.

"Sir," one of the Watch Officers called, "updated data indicates that one of the dropships is going to hit Chicago or Detroit. Given their flight path the highest probability is Chicago, Sir."

Regional Command Center
Naval Station Great Lakes
North Chicago

"General Smith," one of the Lieutenants called, "Flash Alert from NORAD, we have conformation that one of the ships will be landing somewhere in or around Chicago! Tracking indicates that the ship launched two Aerospace Fighters in orbit and is now being escorted during reentry."

"Dammit," the General snarled. "Alert the Air Combat Group that's that they should expect company soon."

He turned to the Officer who was trying to keep the command center from erupting into chaos.

"Colonel Keeting," He said. "What's the situation in the city?"

The Colonel looked up from the console he was studying. "Well Sir," He said. "Colonel Anderson, is reporting that they're still trying to get the city locked down. Now that we know that Chicago is the target the Governor has agreed to the imposition of martial law on the greater Chicago area. We've got every police man in the city turned out and trying to clear the streets so we will be able to move troops through the area rapidly."

"Equipment wise, so far another four M1s have arrived bringing us up to two companies of tanks. Also the second wave of recruits, from this base, has arrived in the city and we're trying to find enough vehicles to take a third wave. Anderson has reported that it would take too long to shift the recruits due to a lack of vehicles, so he is commandeering pickup trucks to transport the men. He also reported that he converted 80 of the pickup trucks into technicals with bolted on infantry TOW missile launchers in addition to the 30 Humvees he already had equipped with TOW missile launchers."

"Colonel Anderson is confident that he can hold the city against any

attack a single dropship can mount with two Tank companies, 1400 national guardsmen and 12,000 armed recruits. At least Sir, he is confident that he can hold so long as the Air Force can come through with its promise of air support."

The General cocked an eyebrow, "And how it is the air support coming Colonel?" he asked.

"Well Sir," the Colonel responded. We already have one Air Combat Group on hand. With 28 F-16s for air support and four B1 bombers loaded with smart bombs for any targets that manage to survive the F-16s. Along with 16 F-14s providing air cover for the rest of the planes. And now that we know that Chicago the target we can expect several more Air Combat Groups to arrive within 40 minutes to an hour."

The General was silent for a moment "Well," He muttered. "That will have to be enough."

Dropship Phantom Wing Approaching Chicago

"Okay people, listen up." Major Brown said. "We'll be landing in a few minutes. As you all know we've been told that all we'll be facing is some lightly armed militia, no mechs and only some unarmored atmosphere fighters and maybe a wet navy ship or two. However they didn't tell us anything about these Motherloaders using nukes, so expect anything on the ground. Our first priority is to secure a perimeter around the dropship. To make thing easier we'll be landing in the middle of one of their airports, so there will be plenty of clear space around the dropship."

He looked at the Commander of the infantry that were packed into every available space on the ship.

"Captain Stevenson, I want your men to spread out and secure the area, if you run into anything more than a few isolated groups of militiamen report back immediately so the mechs know where they need to reinforce your men."

He eyed the mech pilots for a moment

"Once the area around the dropship is secure, I'm going to take two lances into the city. We'll probably have to shoot through some militia units, but once we've defeated the militia units and seized the center of the City we will be able to convince the authorities in the surrender to us. However the most important thing, is don't get overconfident. Stay together and watch each others backs. They surprised us with nukes in orbit, I don't want to get surprised like that on the ground."

He smiled.

"Mount up. We'll be arriving shortly. And remember, we pull this off we'll all be as rich as Lords."

Air Combat Group
Outside Chicago

Although Lt. Col. Young could now see the dropship with the naked eye, due to the fact it was at a much lower altitude and slowing in preparation to land. He issued no new orders for the F-16s under his command. Instead he waited patiently, taking no action, as the fighters simply continued to slowly circle the City at a distance of 25 miles. Young knew they didn't have a snowballs chance in hell of stopping the dropship with the weapons they currently had, so he patently waited for the dropship to land and disembark it's cargo of walking targets. He took his eyes off the dropship for a moment to glance above and behind him for a moment, to reassure himself that the F-14s were still there. He knew that they too would be facing some incredibly dangerous opponents in a short while and he hoped that they would be able to win the fight, or at least lasts long enough for his F-16s to complete their mission. And he hoped that that F-14s would deal to stop any attempts to interrupt airstrikes on the attacking mechs. In many ways, he thought to himself, he was glad that he did not have face the aerospace fighters that he knew were coming. All he had to face were some mechs on the ground who while dangerous, wouldn't be chasing him all over the sky.

A minute later the Young realized he was now certain of where the dropship was heading. It was obvious, with the way the dropship was slowing down preparing to land that it was heading for the airport on the south-western part of the city and so he promptly radioed it in.

"Command, Viper One here. We have visual on the dropship. Dropship looks to heading for Chicago Midway International Airport."

"Roger, Viper One." Command responded. "We'll begin shifting units over to cordon off the landing zone. We'll need you to hit them as soon as the mechs are off loaded. Take some time for all the units were arrive at the landing zone. You must hit them as hard as you can, and keep them in at the airport and if it all possible prevent the mechs from heading into the city."

"Wilco, Command." Young said. "We'll hit them hard as we can as soon as they're down and out."

**Washington DC,
Motherload,
November 14th, 2005 local time.**

"Take a left here, Natasha," Her passenger said. "It's a shortcut."

"Damn it, I am NOT Natasha Kerensky!" Natalie replied, twisting *Old Melville* down the side street.

"We've established that. But I don't have anything else to call you. Besides, doesn't it feel good to be mistaken for a notoriously beautiful and competent pilot?" Her hitchhiker replied, "And on top of that, you're asking for it with a callsign like Black Widow."

Natalie sighed. How was she to know there was already an incredibly famous Black Widow out there when she chose it?

"Maybe," Then she asked, "What's your name, anyway?"

"Corporal Anton Greene, but you can call me Ants." He replied.

"Ants? What the hell kind of name is Ants?"

"It's called a nickname. People have them amongst friends. I figure if I'm going to hijack your mech, I should at least extend you a little courtesy." Greene replied.

"Hijack? I'm the one in the pilot seat, buster." Natalie replied.

"Yup. And I'm the one with... Hmm. Twenty pounds, give or take, of high explosives taped to my body. Unless you've got a death wish, you're going to do what I say." He smiled, "I'm the one calling the shots here. You're just someone I've impressed into service with my roguish good looks and explosively energetic personality. Oh, and take another right."

"Lousy backseat driver." Natalie muttered.

"You know, it's too bad your systems aren't compatible with ours."

We've probably got a couple dozen reconnaissance drones flying around giving us intel, but you can't receive any of it. It'd let us get a better sight of the enemy, that's for sure."

"I know you motherloaders are rich, but nobody's that rich. Drones are almost as rare and expensive as mechs."

"Say what? Expensive? That's the whole point of using drones instead of people. Why pay sixty million bucks for a spyplane when you can have a cheap-o drone for a hundred thousand? My daughter said you guys were in a dark age, but that's just craz-"

"Backwards? Who're the ones without proper mechs, proper spacetravel, proper weaponry, and just about anything more advanced than pissant peasant toys?"

"Us," Greene conceded. "We make up for it with craziness and a willingness to hijack your mechs. Speaking of which, I'm going to need you to take a right up here. We're almost at the nav where our mercs wanted to rendezvous."

"I don't see them." Natalie said, her eyes darting down to *Old Melville's* radar display.

"Me neither. Give 'em a little time, unless you feel up to tackling whatever other baddies are in the area." Greene replied.

"A heavy lance, all on my lonesome? I don't think so." Natalie replied.

"Not totally alone. You have me, your helpful navigator and devoted loveslave!"

Natalie snorted.

Overhead, an American F-16 dogfighting one of the pirate aerospace fighters fell to pieces, completely torn apart by one of the invaders' autocannons.

Greene sighed. "So, you know any good jokes?"

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It only took the Buron cav minutes to ford the river and arrive. It wasn't a minute too soon for Natalie. Sitting around twiddling her thumbs in a war zone wasn't her idea of a fun time.

"Took you long enough, Iron," Natalie said, irritation leaking into her voice.

Greene whispered "Temper, temper," from his position in the cockpit's rear.

"Well, sorry to let you wait, Widow. Fall in, we're moving to intercept those Port Krin goons. Interception point is Nav Beta," The mercenaries' leader replied.

"You know, Natasha... I'm sure my government would look favorably upon you if you gave them a dropship, all gift-wrapped with a big red bow on it." Greene said.

"They aren't getting mine. Not permanently. And for the last time, I'm not-" Natalie started to reply.

"-I was thinking more along the lines of accepting a donation. Those 'Port Krin goons' came in on another dropship, right? And they're off looting my hometown, so the dropship should be easy pickings." Greene replied.

"You know, that's actually a good idea. I'm surprised, local," Natalie replied, thumbing on her commo set and switching to her unit's frequency. "Blue, what can you tell me about the Krin dropship?"

"Hey! I have lots of good ideas!" Greene pouted from behind her.

"Arr... Err... Ah! Okay. Those rum runners came in on the *Servitor*, a old Leopard class dropship that's had its missiles and PPCs removed to make room for cargo and looting parties. It still outguns anything we have except your mech." Blue replied, taking a moment to reach the comm. "Sorry, I had to get these Buron guys off my back. Nice folks when they're not trying to kill you. But whatever you do, don't

accept offers of free booze! The stuff they drink is enough to give even my cast iron liver trouble!"

"Only you, Blue," Natalie replied with a smile. "But that still leaves us without enough firepower to take that ship."

"Appeal to the fact that we've got nuclear platforms in orbit and a whole army on the ground. Either way they're fucked. If they surrender, they'll be treated humanely." Greene replied. "Tell them that. I was a psych major in school. Chances are, they're scared and confused. If you give them an option besides fighting to the death or getting nuked, I think they'll take it."

"Is it the truth?" Natalie asked.

Greene nodded. "Probably. We're going to want as many people who know how to fly those things as possible."

"Fine. Brox, Tyron, I've got orders for you. Uploading NAV data for the Krin dropship, *Servitor*. I want you to take it and get it to stand down through any means necessary. My..." She glanced at Greene, "... Liason with our new employers assures me that we can promise that they'll be 'treated humanely' and not executed if they surrender."

"Roj, Widow." Tyron replied.

Two taps on her radio said Brox was acknowledging his orders as well.

"Now, let's go kick some ass." Natalie said.

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"Damn. Iron 3, Widow, get that bastard before he slams into our boys up north. Iron 2 and me will advance on those guys here and pin them in place," Iron Lead said. At least, Natalie presumed the person giving her orders was Iron Lead.

"On it," Natalie replied.

She accelerated towards the radar hit, with a Black Knight at her side. Iron 3, no doubt.

It was a tight fit in these narrow streets. She couldn't help but crush a few parked cars underneath her mech's weight.

The first thing she saw of the enemy mech was a literal *eruption* of missiles. Natalie braced for a split second on instinct, before her rational mind took over and realized that no, those missiles were heading for the other poor bastard accompanying her.

The Black Knight fell to the ground in a heap. Strange – a heavy mech like that should've been good for at least a few barrages. Must have been an unlucky hit.

In the distance, she could see an Archer dodge behind a building.

"Iron 3 is down," She said, thumbing her comms back to Iron Lance's frequencies. "I don't see any major damage to his mech, though. I'm getting that asshole in his Archer."

Natalie raised her Battlemaster's arm, the ER PPC glinting dangerously in the sunlight as she advanced.

"Come on..." She said to no one in particular.

As she expected, the Archer ducked out of cover, intent on catching her in another missile barrage.

Instead, it caught a PPC to the upper torso; only quick actions by its pilot and a leap back into cover stopped it from being a direct cockpit hit.

Damn.

Natalie set off in pursuit – Archers had lots of nasty long range punch, but their short range prowess left a lot to be desired. If she could get in its engagement envelope, she'd have almost free reign to take that thing apart. LRMs wouldn't even lock on at close rang-

She turned the corner and crashed, cockpit-first, into a barrage of missiles, with a pair of searing ruby beams nailing her left torso armor as she jerked back in shock.

He must have been refitted with some SRMs. What was that variant, ARC-2S? Something like that.

"Less analysis, more asskicking, Natasha!" Greene said.

She'd said that aloud? Fuck.

And then the Archer ducked behind yet another building. Doublefuck.

"There's a side street here that'll let you loop around, maybe catch him in the rear." Greene said.

Natalie took it, coming ass-to-face with that Archer. She fired her ER PPC, liquefying several tons of its rear armor, and then followed it up with a barrage of deadly strobes from her medium lasers.

Heat washed over the cockpit only to recede as the starleague-made double heat sinks did their work.

The Archer's only reply was its rear medium lasers, but they were wildly aimed and went wide as a result.

For all Greene's backseat driving, it was handy having someone here who actually knew the area well.

Natalie fired her own SRMs, six deadly missiles lancing out and striking one of the Archer's arms. It hung by but a thread of artificial myomer.

She roared in primal bloodlust and charged forward. The Archer pilot, evidently deciding that he had enough, accelerated forward in an attempt to round the bend and perhaps turn and catch her with another barrage of missiles.

He was too slow. Natalie's Battlemaster was able to catch the mech

by its undamaged arm. Then, she pulled back. The Archer staggered, and Natalie went for the kill. She grabbed the other arm with her free hand and, raising her mech's leg to the Archer's back for leverage, she pulled. Hard.

The already damaged left arm gave easily. Natalie fired her medium lasers at point blank range into the right, in hopes of severing it as she brought up the now dismembered arm and smashed it down onto the Archer's upper-rear torso.

Its armor buckled, even as its other arm came free in her mech's hand.

She brandished both the arms as clubs, smashing them into the Archer's torso and bludgeoning its ablative armor away until, at last, she could see its internals.

Then she fired her lasers into the left leg, repeating the process until the mech was quite handily crippled.

"Surrender," Natalie said, as she backed up and charged her mech's arm-mounted PPC. One good hit would take him down and probably detonate his ammo too. She wanted to be well away when a mech loaded with missiles like that cooked off.

"Rot in hell!"

"Mr. PPC says 'right back at you!'" Natalie replied, firing her PPC straight into the Archer's cockpit. Unfortunately, the heat of the blast was simply too much for the missiles to take – they detonated, just as Natalie feared. Glass fell to the ground in a great pulse of jagged shards as the shockwave roared over the buildings and down to Natalie's mech, bowling *Old Melville* over.

"This is Black Widow. The Archer is down. Ammo explosion. The guy didn't punch out."

As the Archer exploded, Natalie sighed. "I hope Brox and Tyron are having better luck with that ship."

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Brox was grinning quite happily. This was the most fun he'd had in the longest time. Dart in, tag another of the *Servitor's* weapons with his own medium laser, dart out. It was like the games he played with his sib. He was always the best at those games. Cutting off a target's weapons and leaving it helpless. Good fun.

And doing it to a dropship was just grand, because he could use it as a mech-scale playground once he didn't have to worry about getting shot. Nobody appreciated just how much fun it was to go dropship climbing. Captain Blue certainly didn't. Poor deprived man. Even Lady Natalie didn't. Poor deprived woman.

The only dismal spot was that the game wasn't very challenging. The dropship's gunners weren't very good at shooting.

"Attention *Servitor*, this is Mechwarrior Tyron from *Jolly Roger*. You are hereby ordered to surrender to native forces. Otherwise I'll have my friend here finish disarming you completely. Do you want to brave the native nuke platforms without any weapons?" Brox heard Tyron say over an open channel.

"We're pirates, boy," The *Servitor's* captain replied. "The minute we step off this ship, we'll be tried and executed. If we're lucky enough to get a trial, that is. The ship's valuable, but us? Life's cheap. Mechs – or dropships, aren't."

"I've been assured by my liason that you will be treated 'humanely' and not executed out of hand." Tyron replied.

Well, technically it was *Natalie's* liason, but Brox wasn't of a mind to quibble over details like that. If the boy wanted to build himself up, who was Brox to stop him?

"Not good enough."

"Fine. Let me put it like this: You have a bunch of options. You can take off trying to get to orbit, get nuked, and die. You stay here, refuse to surrender, get shot at by the native army, plus a company of

mercs, and die. You take off trying to get somewhere else planetside, get nuked, and die. Are you seeing a trend here? Or, you can surrender, hope I'm telling the truth, and probably not die. Which will it be?"

Brox knew what he'd choose. Then again, going out in a blaze of glory wasn't all that popular amongst dropship crews. He'd always thought they were a little too safe and secure in their big metal coffins. No sense of adventure or danger. Not like him.

"Fine. We surrender." It sounded to Brox as if the man was physically pained by the admission.

Oh wells. His loss.

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The battle was, for the most part, over. So she powered down her mech and took the time to stretch out her legs and get some fresh air. Things were going to get awfully uncertain in the future. And she'd have motherloader techs crawling all over her mech. Still, she'd negotiated a decent contract, even if it was a little spur of the moment. It was a damn sight better than the alternative.

Speaking of motherloaders in her mech, where had Greene disappeared to?

"Hey, Natasha!" She heard him call from behind. She turned, and he asked, "Ready for your first lunch on Earth?"

She didn't have time to ponder his strange statement before he'd peeled off one of the explosive packs taped to his uniform and tossed it to her.

Was this some kind of strange motherloader initiation ritual? Surely he didn't mean for her to eat the explosives.

She snatched it out of the air, puzzled.

In a moment, however, her puzzlement had morphed into anger as

she read the label on the other side of the pack.

Rations. That bastard had tricked her and damn near hijacked her mech with *field rations*!

Greene, for his part, just smiled a cheeky smile, and gestured towards a semi-wrecked café. "Milady, your banquet awaits!"

The damn smile was infectious. Natalie couldn't help but find one creeping unbidden over her face. "Oh, fine. You got me good this time. Savor your victory, Greene. It's the last one you're ever going to get over on me."

"Fortunately, getting one under on you is still open!" Greene replied.

National Guards Temporary Camp
outside Washington DC
14 November 2005/3020

"What's this I hear about an incident with a wrench, Lieutenant?" Major Helen Norton, MD, asked, managing to keep a straight face. The doctor couldn't help but needle the young men she was in charge of keeping fit.

Second Lieutenant Joseph Chalmers coughed, putting his hands over his face to cover the sight blush. He took a moment to recover and then explained. "Well one of the prisoners we took was some sort of technician. She got very, uh, agitated when we took her tools. She claimed that they were family heirlooms, passed down for four generations."

"Heirlooms, Joe?" Lieutenant Charles Winters asked. "Who keeps a wrench as a family heirloom?"

"Well a wrench is certainly more practical than the gaudy pearls I got from my mother," Major Norton noted, between sips of her coffee.

"From what I understand," Chalmers said, "these people come from a semi-feudal culture. In Earth's middle ages, it wasn't unusual for tools of the trade to be passed down from parent to child. Especially when you're in a barter economy, the 'tools of the trade', so to speak, would have been an important part of the inheritance someone from the lower classes might receive upon his parent's death. Specialized tools means special orders to the blacksmith – not something you can just do. And most kids went into the same trade as their parents."

"Yeah, but these people aren't coming from a middle ages technological base," Winters cut in. "I mean, giant walking tanks, for crying out loud."

"They've technologically regressed. From what I've heard, there was this big confederation all these states were a part of, and when it fell apart, the universities and research labs and factories got nuked to hell and back. There's things they have that they're running with their

equivalent of duct tape and chewing gum because they don't know how to build any new ones anymore. Plus, these guys are from a small time pirate state, like that island in that Disney movie, what was it called?" Chalmers massaged the bridge of his nose, as if it would help his memory.

"Pirates of the Carribean." Winters supplied helpfully.

"I think he meant the name of the island," Norton said dryly. "And it was Tortuga."

"Tortuga! Thank you. Anyway, they're a backwater. They might not be big enough to have a local industry for producing mechanic's tools. And I can't imagine a down on her luck technician can afford interstellar shipping fees. But tools like these, they'll last a good long time if they're of quality manufacture. I can buy the set she had being a century old."

"A century?" Norton shook her head. "That really would make it a heirloom."

"Passed down for four generations, she said," supplied Chalmers.

"Heh, I could just see it. Little girl learnin' the trade at her pappy's knee, with her hair tied back in a ponytail and grease on her cheeks." Winters grinned at the mental image.

"Hey, don't be a chauvinist, maybe it was at her mother's knee" Norton interjected.

"Well, no. Her mother was a slave."

"They still have slavery out there?" Winters shook his head. "Now that's crazy. Even if they have technological regression, so long as they know what steam engines are, slaves aren't economically efficient at all."

"Her mother probably wasn't a laborer, Charles." Norton set down her coffee, suddenly not wanting to drink anymore. "There are other reasons to keep slaves than economic ones."

"Oh. That kind of slave."

"Yeah."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Norton spoke as much to relieve the tension as out of genuine curiosity. "So, you were telling us about the wrench."

"Right. It was really a nice piece of workmanship. Big sturdy thing, not the kind you find in a toolkit, normally. She really didn't want to be parted from it. She tried to get me to let her keep the whole kit, but when I said no, she started wheedling for just the wrench."

"I assume you held firm?" Winters asked.

"I pointed out that it was potentially usable as a club and therefore I couldn't leave it with her. Though I have a suspicion that was the idea -some of the bruisers we captured her with looked really unsavory, and given what happened with her mother. . ."

"Ah" Norton nodded. "She was afraid they'd get too friendly. Didn't she think we would stop that?"

"Tortuga, remember? These are pirates, or at least the people who work with them. Not exactly the types who are known for following the Geneva Convention. Past history wouldn't give her much in the way of positive expectations." Chalmers looked aggrieved at that. "I told my CO that we needed to segregate the men and the women."

"Ares Conventions," Winter corrected him, after another pause between them.

"Huh?" Norton blinked.

"These 'Battletech' people have the Ares Conventions, which include something similar to our Geneva Conventions. But they're mainly about not nuking civilian populations," Winters explained. The other two gave him a familiar look. "Hey, I can read you know. Just because I didn't do a complete socioeconomic analysis of their culture

like Joe did doesn't mean I'm completely ignorant"

"I take it they have these conventions because it happened."

"Since when did you become the cynical one, Helen?" Chalmers wanted to know.

"We apparently have the daughter of a sexually abused slave-girl in lock-up."

"Point taken"

A third awkward moment ensued. Norton broke the silence. "You still haven't told me why the others were sniggering over the wrench."

Chalmers was blushing when he replied. "She offered sexual favors in exchange for being allowed to keep the wrench. That's how we found out about her mother. She implied her mother taught her as much as her father did." He sighed "It seemed funny at the time."

Dropship *Majd Udeen*
Over the Red Sea
Earth
14 November, 3020

Captain Jane Ibrahim gritted her teeth as The *Majd Udeen* roared across the waters of the Red Sea at three times the speed of sound. They'd only been able to affect a quick repair on the damaged port stabilizer and it was painfully apparent it wasn't holding up too well. Still, she could handle it. She didn't like it but she could handle it. Wasn't her *Sparrowhawk*, but the *Leopard* was a good ship, abet sluggish so she had few worries. And if it did fail, well, they wouldn't have time for regrets anyways. At these speeds, the word of the day would be 'salsa'.

It was moments like this she'd almost wished she'd never joined this band of merry misfits. What really had her worried was their leader was going to be taking her husband on a suicide mission. She understood that it was necessary. If she still had her fighter she'd be roaring along ready to fight and die as well. After all, it was Mecca they were flying to save, returned to them by the hand of god himself. Instead of fighting though, she was stuck driving the truck.

When she found out she was going to have her first child they'd all agreed that maybe it wasn't the brightest idea to have a pregnant woman flying a aerospace fighter, a wise decision in most people book. Unfortunately she'd allowed someone else to take up the stick of her families fighter. Big mistake that, asshole'd got himself waxed just a month afterwards in a routine raid against a half defended Kurita supply depot, taking her birthright with him. She could only hope that he was getting what she felt would be a fitting final reward: an eternity of being sodomized by demons, in hell. Bastard.

She was a one of the hidden Muslims born in the Combine, outside the Azami Brotherhood, who had been forced to hide her faith from the Dragon's thugs. When her father died in battle, as his only child she'd inherited his fighter and his responsibility to serve House Kurita. Instead she ran, her objective to reach Galatea. She'd rather ply her trade as a mercenary then serve the bastards who'd brutally

oppressed her people for so long. Originally she'd joined the crew simply to get a lift, trading her services for transport, but Aladdin gotten to her and she'd simply stayed on. After some time she fell in love with one of the MechWarriors, they married, she was officially one of the family.

"This is your captain speaking," she said over the Comlink to the ships . "please put your seat backs and tray tables in their full and upright position. ETA to target area, ninety seconds. Oh, and Khan, if you die, I'm going to kill you."

"Quite the wife you have there," Ahmad, one of the other BattleMech pilots laughed over the line, "Very quiet and obedient. Perfect, dutiful Muslim bride."

"Bah," her husband laughed, "She keeps me on my toes!"

"Silence, both of you," their leader cut in with amusement in his voice, "She is a strong woman and a good mother with a unshakable faith, even if she's not a very 'traditional' woman."

"By 'not very traditional', you mean she's willful, sarcastic, thinks she knows better than her husband, and is quite possibly mad?" Khan asked.

"Yes, that." Aladdin laughed.

"Khan, if you make it out of this alive, I hope you don't expect to ever have sex again."

"You know the Koran says a man has the right to beat a woman who does not do her duties as wife and mother, correct?"

"Yeah. I also know that I can kick your ass in a fist fight, husband."

"True. True. Besides, more often than I'd like to admit, you do indeed know better than your husband. I don't know what I'd do without you, my flower."

She smiled and felt a tear run down her face. "Don't die."

"I will do my best, but if Allah wills me to die, then I will meet you in paradise."

Looking at the indicator she frowned and looked at the screen. "Oh shit."

"What is it?"

"Its not just a Union. One of the three Mules is also at the target!"

"Um, boss, if I'm not mistaken, each of those carries a regiment of foot infantry and short regiment of armor, right"

"You would be correct," Aladdin replied.

"Yeah, we're screwed."

Jane winced and clenched the stick. Damn it! Damn it all! "We're at the drop zone"

With a flick of a switch she opened the outer doors and out jumped one lance of 'Mechs and a company of jump infantry. In other words, everything they had.

She smiled.

Almost everything.

She smiled as she wheeled the Dropship around and looked at the two large sphereoids in the distance. She could almost make out the vehicles still slowly streaming out of the Mule's cargo bay. A cruel smile came to her face.

"Get my a targeting solution on that Mule. Aim for the cargo doors."

"What?"

"I want to put a couple flights of LRMs down its hatch."

"Aye, ma'am."

She grinned as the gunners opened fire. Three flights of 20 LRMs flew from their racks for the battered metal sphere. Not for the first time she thanked god for such a skilled crew as almost 50 of the 60 missiles landed inside the ship. Flying at almost a crawl she they fired two more volleys, ablating armor and wreaking havoc among the light armor that had already been unloaded.

"Thermal spike from the Mule, ma'am. I think we started a fire."

"Good," the ship shuddered as the Union woke up and began to provide anti-aircraft fire, along with sporadic from the units already on the ground. "I think that's our exit cue."

Swinging the stick around she put the engines and began a wide circle around the city. From here on she was a spectator. As much as she'd like to fight, to get in and provide close air support, the unit's dependents were on the ship. Her children were on this ship, and they'd all agreed that it simply wasn't worth the risk.

Not for the first time, she wished she had her fucking fighter back.

Masjid al-Haram
Mecca, Saudi Arabia
Earth
14 November, 3020

Aladdin took a deep breath as his BattleMech touched down with a loud thunk. He now stood before the most holy sight in Islam, occupied by thousands of the faithful, with his lance the only guardian force between them and an entire company of enemy 'Mechs with attendant armor and infantry looking to loot and pillage.

"Do not fear!" he exclaimed over his external microphone. "I am Alladin Al Azim of the Azami Free Army. I am here to answer the call of Jihad, to protect the faithful from those who would bring carnage to the holy city! As long as we draw breath, they shall not pass! Allahu akbar!"

The response from the throng of faithful was deafning as they returned his cry of 'Allahu akbar'.

With a smile on his face he closed his eyes for just a moment. This was the moment he'd been waiting for his entire life. He was going to die here, but he would rise again among God's chosen. This moment was the climax of his life. Everything he'd ever done was done as to lead up to this one moment.

Slowly a smile came to the warrior cleric's face as the enemy entered range. God was truly merciful. He'd seen the dedication of his people and he'd rewarded them by restoring the holy city to them, and if his life was the price that was needed to protect it, he was honored to die this day.

15 November, 2005
Brigade Command Center
Chicago, United States
Earth

Colonel Anderson looked up from the map studying, when he heard someone call his name. He saw a corporal enter the room who seemed very excited.

"What's going on Corporal?" He asked.

"New orders Sir." the Corporal responded. We have confirmation that the Pirates dropship will be landing at Chicago Midway International Airport. Command is ordering us to cordon off the area and engage any enemy troops."

"Damn," the Colonel swore as he looked at the pins marking where units were stationed on the map. "We have less than a thousand men who can get there quickly and only two tanks, the rest of the units will need more time to get there." Anderson thought quickly for a moment. "Order all units to converge on the Chicago Midway International Airport. All units are to form a cordon around the airport, but they are to stay out of sight and are not engage enemy forces except in self-defense. They are going to need a lot more reinforcement to deal with the enemy landing than a thousand soldiers."

He looked up at the assembled officers in the room. "Get the order out now! Cordon the airport, we attack on my command only."

Anderson grabbed his helmet and vest from where he left it on a nearby chair. "Okay people move out," he said as he strode toward the door.

As he reached the street, he took in the frantic pace activity. Vehicles were quickly being loaded, and the Humvees and the pickup trucks mounting tow missile launchers were already beginning to move out. The rest of the national guardsmen were piling into their Humvees, while the recruits from the Navy base were packing themselves into

the backs of commandeered pickup trucks. As he waited for his Humvee to arrive, he wondered with a sense of sadness just how many people who were leaving would be alive after the battle.

Dropship Phantom Wing
Chicago, United States
Earth

Major Brown could feel the dropship slowing as it came in to land. Less than a minute later he felt the gentle thump of the dropship touching down. Moments later the bay door opened, and he drove his BattleMaster down the ramp and onto the pavement of the landing strip the dropship landed on.

Once he was sure that there were no immediate enemies waiting to attack him, he paused to take in the sight of the massive city in which they had landed. He had known that the Motherloaders were rich however he hadn't realized just how much there was. From what he could see of the city, it looked like something he would have expected to find as the capital to one of the Great Houses of the Inner Sphere. And he was amazed as he recalled the fact that there were dozens of cities of this size on this one planet.

Despite the Shock he felt at seeing the true size and wealth of this Motherloader's city, he didn't let it distract him from ensuring that all the mechs were following his deployment orders. He could already see the light mechs taking up screening positions several hundred meters from the dropship while the medium and assault mechs stayed closer to the dropship and formed the heavy hitting core of his assault force.

As he watched, he could see dozens of the infantry they had packed onto the dropship, spreading out and advancing past the line of light mechs. It would take a few minutes for the infantry to the main buildings of the airport. Once they had secured the buildings and ensured the area was secured, he would be able to lead most of his mechs into the city and force their surrender.

Although he wasn't surprised, he was annoyed to find out that the

buildings around the airport had already been occupied by some of planetary militia. Thankfully however, it didn't seem like there were many of the planetary militia nearby as the infantry reported their only under light fire.

He was beginning to think that conquering this city wouldn't be too hard, until the dropship radioed him. "Major Brown, we have several dozen fighters moving rapidly toward us."

Brown swiftly crushed the feeling of panic that threaten to overwhelm him, when the dropship reported dozens of enemy fighters moving in. However a moment later he relaxed somewhat as he remembered that although numerous, motherloader's fighters were small and unarmored. Doubtless they would take some damage, but they should be able to wipe out all the attacking fighters without too much difficult.

Hearing some of the other mech pilots beginning to worry he decided to offer some reassurance along with some orders.

"All mechs fall back to within 100 meters of the dropship, and switch to air defense mode. Remember you only need one hit to take them down, the enemy fighters are unarmored and so small that even infantry could shoot down with machine guns. So once they get close enough to engage us, we'll blow them out of the sky."

Brown was surprised when a couple of minutes later the dropship reported that the fighters in turned back once they had gotten to within 20 kilometers. He looked in puzzlement towards the direction the fighters were. About 20 seconds later he saw what looked like a hundred thin lines streaking through the sky towards them. Several seconds later he realized that those thin lines looked like the exhaust from rocket engines, which meant that those must be missiles. He couldn't believe that those fighters had fired missiles at them from more than 20 kilometers away. He rapidly grew concerned again when he considered the fact that if they were launching from that far away, they must be expecting to hit their targets, and therefore must have some kind of lostech missile.

Since the fighters were far outside of the range of any of the mechs.

Brown ordered the dropship to open fire on the Motherloaders' fighters and attempt to shoot them down, ignoring or overriding all objections that the fighters were out of range in the atmosphere. He hoped that, since the Motherloaders' fighters were unarmored, the lasers might be able to do a little damage to the fighters and drive them off.

Air Combat Group
Chicago, United States
Earth

Lt. Col. Young had tensely been waiting for the orders to attack, so in some ways it was almost a relief when the orders finally came.

"Viper One, this is Command. Spotters at the landing site have reported that all mechs have been offloaded from the dropship. Airport security forces and local police have engaged enemy infantry, and are requesting air support to engage the enemy mechs before they attack."

"Viper One, you are now cleared to engage. And try to keep them penned in at the airport until the ground forces are able to engage."

"All Vipers, this is Viper One. You are cleared to engage, I repeat cleared to engage. First group follow me in, second group hit the survivors." Young ordered.

Immediately after Young gave the orders, his fighter along with 13 others broke from the formation and accelerated towards the airport. The other 14 fighters reformed their formation and followed at a slower pace, giving the first wave of fighters the time needed to hit their targets.

As the fighters got closer to the dropship threat warning indicators inside the F-16s cockpits began to light up warning the pilots as search and tracking radars began to paint the fighters. However, the pilots ignored the warnings, secure in the knowledge that they were far outside the engagement range for the mechs and dropship on the ground.

Once the fighters had reached a distance of 15 miles from the dropship, they were close enough for their sensors to detect and differentiate between the individual mechs. Even near the maximum range for the Maverick missiles, acquiring the targets only took a few seconds, and launching about ten seconds more.

As the F-16s finished launching their missiles and broke off their attack runs, racing away at high-speed on their journey back to the base from which they launched, to rearm and refuel. They were more concerned about the pair of aerospace fighters circling over their heads at more than 180,000 feet above them, then about any threats of retaliation from their targets on the ground from which they were out of range.

Unfortunately for the pilots, the intelligence officers who had briefed them had overlooked the fact that although dropships typically only engage targets which are less than a kilometer or two away, when on the ground. When in space, dropships have the sensors and targeting precision to engage aerospace fighters and other dropships at a ranges of hundreds of kilometers. And that the only reason dropships didn't engage enemy units at a long-distance while on the ground, was because the atmosphere dissipated too much of a laser or particle beams energy to cause any significant damage to an armored aerospace fighter.

Therefore the pilots were stunned when five of the fighters flying alongside them suddenly blew up or flew apart in a ball of fire as lasers from the dropship burned them out of the sky. A particle beam, which had been fired split-second after the lasers, struck a sixth F-16 vaporizing part of the wings, rear and ventral surface of the fighter and igniting the fuel stored onboard. The resulting explosion cremated the pilot before he was even aware his plane had been hit.

As the fighters continued to race away from the dropship, they began to take evasive maneuvers trying to break any attempts at target locks, while they launched chaff and flares in an attempt to fool the enemy sensors.

It became obvious that their wild maneuvering along with the masses

of decoys dropped by the planes, prevented any of the Pirates from getting firm target locks. And lasers and particle beams lit up the sky as the dropship attempted to shoot down the fleeing fighters.

Lt. Col. Young led the first group of fighters away from the dropship, as they went full afterburner and raced for the ground in an attempt to put some distance between their fighters the dropship and get below the horizon and out of line of sight with the dropship.

The lasers and particle beams came ever closer to the fleeing fighters as the Pirates refined their targeting solutions. Despite the wild evasions of the fighters, two more F-16s reducing to clouds of shattered wreckage when they were hit by lasers as they retreated.

For Young, the realization that he had lost more than half of the first group of fighters shocked him enough that it slowed his evasive maneuvers. This allowed the one of the gunners on the dropship one last shot before the fighters were out of range again. And the last thing Young saw was a flash of blue-white a split second before the particle beam hit his fighter and reduced it to a cloud of burning debris and molten metal droplets.

The five surviving fighters of the first wave retreated at full afterburner going supersonic at less than 100 feet, and leaving behind a trail of shattered windows and deafened people.

The pirate group did not escape the exchange without casualties. More than 70 Maverick missiles, a mix of the lighter Air Force and heavier naval variants, were launched by the F-16s at the mechs. Several of the mech pilots tried to dodge the oncoming missiles, while a number of the pilots hit their jump jets in an attempt to get out of the way of the subsonic missiles. Thirty of the Maverick missiles missed their targets, not being designed to be able to track a target that could jump a football field with ease. However, two maverick missiles managed hit the leg of a Phoenix Hawk while it was in the air. The explosion resulting from 600 pounds of explosives detonating damaged the Phoenix Hawk's leg, but the real damage was done by the explosive force of the missiles which knocked the mech out of control causing it to land on its stomach, and killing the pilot.

A Wasp and two Stingers were also blown apart as they tried to absorb 15 Maverick missiles between them. The Hunchback was hit by 13 missiles which blasted through the armor on the torso, with the final two missiles shattering the reactor and detonating the ammo for the AC/20. The resulting detonation sent pieces of shattered Hunchback flying for as far as a mile. The last 10 missiles, a mix comprised mostly of the lighter Air Force variants, impacted on the pair of BattleMasters shattering armor but otherwise doing no real damage.

The second wave of F-16s were rudely surprised when two of their number blew up after being hit by several lasers fired by a diving Sparrowhawk almost 18 miles above them. They had been concentrating on avoiding being shot down by the dropship, and had then doing a low altitude high-speed run towards the dropship and their targets.

The F-14s who had been flying air cover had detected the Aerospace fighters breaking their patrol pattern high in the atmosphere and beginning their dive to counterattack the American fighters pounding the Pirates landing site. Unfortunately for the F-16s, it had taken the F-14s pilots some time to get into the favorable launching positions to attack targets that had been circling more than thirty miles directly above them.

The Sparrowhawk being faster than its companion was leading the charge against the attacking F-16s. Screaming downward at more than 2000 miles an hour the pilot of the Sparrowhawk managed to shoot down an additional three F-16s before he had pull up and break off his attack. The fact that the Sparrowhawk leveled out and began to loop around again for another pass at the F-16s, was its downfall. Even as the Sparrowhawk was diving the F-14s after achieved a lock on with their missiles and every F-14 in the group fired a pair of Phoenix missiles at the Sparrowhawk.

The speed the Sparrowhawk was traveling as it dove, and the fact that the F-14s fired from an angle that was from behind the Sparrowhawk, was the only thing that kept the Phoenix missiles from quickly catching up and obliterating the fighter. The pilot of the

Sparrowhawk hadn't even considered the fact that there might be even longer ranged missiles than the ones he had seen being used to attack the mechs.

Therefore, once the Sparrowhawk had slowed down and began turning around for another pass, the pursuing missiles caught up with their unsuspecting target. Thirteen of the pursuing missiles missed the tightly banking Sparrowhawk, the remaining 19 missiles impacted on the fighter with the first dozen missiles shattering the armor on one of the wings and the fuselage before last seven missiles impacted on the already damage areas and blew the fighter in half. As the remains of the Sparrowhawk spiraled out of control, the F-14s quickly radioed in a fighters last position, so that if the pilot had ejected he could be quickly captured on the ground.

The Lucifer seeing the fate of its smaller cousin switched targets from the F-16s to the F-14s and opened fire. Volleys of LRMs streaked downwards even as the Lucifer opened fire with lasers strafing the F-14s and destroying three fighters. Even as the F-14s launched a volley of Phoenix missiles at the Lucifer, the Lucifer's volley of LRMs reached the F-14s. Most of LRMs, being fired far outside their atmospheric range, missed. However the fact that the LRMs were fired almost vertically downwards meant that several missiles managed to connect with a pair of F-14s and reduced them to clouds of expanding debris.

The Lucifer in an attempt to avoid the return fire from the F-14s, tried to evade Phoenix missiles by using its powerful engines to pull out of its dive and go into a rapid climb, while trying to out turn the Phoenix missiles. The attempt was mostly successful as 25 of the Phoenix missiles missed their target, the remaining seven missiles managed to impact on the fuselage and one wing, thinning the armor considerably and causing some damage to the wing.

The Lucifer, after managing to climb back to almost 30 miles above the ground, quickly turned and dived engaging the remaining F-14s, attacked them with lasers, and managing to down another four fighters. The seven remaining F-14s volleyed all the remaining Phoenix missiles at the Lucifer. The Phoenix missiles not being designed for almost vertical climbs up to targets 25 miles overhead,

almost completely burnt out their engines as they raced upwards to intercept the Lucifer. Seeing the lines in the sky from the exhaust of the oncoming missiles the pilot attempted to pull out of his dive and evade. However, the Lucifer was unable to successfully evade the second volley of Phoenix missiles, and most of the missiles impacted on the fighter. Shattering the armor on the fuselage, from the nose to the tail, and blowing off one of the wings. The last few missiles impacted on the already damage areas and blew the fighter apart.

Dropship Phantom Wing
Chicago, United States
Earth

Even as the surviving mechs were pulling themselves back together. The dropship warned them that a second wave of fighters was inbound.

Major Brown swore wildly when the alert was transmitted. He had already lost more than a lance of mechs, and that was way more casualties than he had expected. And the thought of losing more of his mechs to the Motherloaders flying targets infuriated him. However, the next transmission from the dropship caused a great deal of relief for him.

"Major," the dropship radioed, "our aerospace fighters are inbound."

Major Brown watched in relief as their aerospace fighters engaged the Motherloaders fighters. In the distance he could see a pair of explosions in the sky followed quickly by three more explosions in rapid succession as their Sparrowhawk engaged the Motherloaders anti-mech fighters. However, his relief was short lived as a few moments later he saw a series of explosions at one point in the sky followed by the Sparrowhawk dropping off screen.

His attention was quickly diverted from the fight in the air when he saw numerous missile contrails appear and start heading straight towards them. As the nine remaining F-16s launched all their missiles of the remaining mechs.

"Incoming!" He screamed over the radio as the 54 Maverick missiles raced towards them.

Most of the surviving lighter mechs immediately hit their jump jets and jumped for positions that would interpose the bulk of the dropship between them and the oncoming missiles. However one pilots of a light mechs, one of the Jenners, had hit his jump jets in a panic and only moved his Mech 500 feet to the left.

The BattleMasters having no jump jets simply braced themselves for the inevitable impacts. However, Brown also crossed the arms of his Mech in front of the torso in an attempt to provide an additional layer of armor for the cockpit and torso of his Mech.

Of the 54 missiles, seven of them went for the Jenner while the rest went after the two bigger targets in their field of view. The seven missiles which hit the Jenner were enough to destroy it's torso and blow one arm flying, while the remains of the mangled machine crashed to the ground. The remaining 47 missiles impacted on the two BattleMasters.

Twenty Three missiles impacted on Brown's BattleMaster shattering the raised arms covering the torso and then demolished the armor covering the entire chest of the BattleMaster and causing damage to the underlying structure. Brown, however, got off lightly compared to his counterpart in the other BattleMaster that was hit. Although that BattleMaster was only hit by one more Phoenix missile then Brown's, four Phoenix missiles impacted on the mechs head killing the pilot, while the rest of the missiles destroyed an arm and shattered the armor along the torso and one of the legs. That BattleMaster swayed for a moment before crashing face down onto the pavement on which it was standing.

Chicago Midway international Airport
Chicago, United States
Earth

Colonel Anderson hoped he would have enough firepower for what was to come. Yet more than 5000 men stationed around the airport, along with a 16 M1 tanks and the dozens of TOW armed Humvees

and technicals. All of them were several streets away from the airport and hiding out of sight from the pirates. Despite the fact he knew that more reinforcements were on the way, he couldn't afford to wait any longer to engage. The Pirates were still recovering from the last airstrike and if he allowed them any more time to reestablish their positions it would make his job that much harder.

He turned to the radioman in his Command Humvee.

"Signal to all units," he said. "Attack!"

He then watched as the units received their orders and the four M1 tanks at the end of the street raced away followed by 17 Humvees and technicals mounting tow missile launchers. These were in turn followed by more than 150 pickup trucks loaded down with soldiers to be delivered to their assigned positions on the perimeter of the airport. Moments later his Command Humvee joined the stream of vehicles heading to the airport.

A minute later Anderson arrived at the perimeter fence of the airport. He could see that the first part of the assault plan had worked perfectly. The tanks which had led the force had simply driven right through the concrete perimeter fence surrounding the airport. And through that hole more than a thousand infantry passed through the fence hot on the heels of the armed Humvees and technicals.

As the force advanced they spread out using the buildings and hangers built near the southern fence, through which they had passed, for cover. The Colonel having dismounted from his Humvee followed the infantry into the airport, keeping only his radioman and a platoon of infantry around him.

The infantry soon passed the tanks and TOW armed vehicles which had formed up into groups and were preparing for the dash out into the open to engage the landed mechs. The pause in the advance by the vehicles, also served another purpose, it allowed the infantry to advance past the vehicles and form a screening element which would protect the vehicles from any attacks that the enemy infantry could possibly mount.

Anderson could hear the chatter of M-16s start and begin rapidly increasing as the infantry ran into enemy soldiers who had been checking out some of the buildings nearby. The outcome was a foregone conclusion as the equivalent of a battalion soldiers clashed head on with about half a company of the pirate's infantry. The battle lasted only a couple minutes as fierce exchanges of gunfire were traded between the two forces, and the overwhelming firepower of the American infantry was brought to bear on the spread out groups of pirates. The chatter of the M-16's was briefly punctuated by several explosions as some of the infantry used LAWs to blow up the pirates who had managed to find some cover. The firing died down as the surviving pirate infantry either surrendered or fled back to the dropship parked in the middle of the airport.

With the enemy infantry dead, captured or fleeing. The tanks advanced, racing out from concealment and turned to engage the enemy mechs. The Humvees and technicals deployed in a skirmish line as they follow the tanks out to the open, depending on their speed and maneuverability to try avoid enemy fire. Meanwhile dozens of antitank teams positioned themselves on the roofs of buildings and offices looking out over the airfield.

Dropship Phantom Wing
Chicago, United States
Earth

Major Browns swore viciously, as he realized that airstrikes had managed to destroy almost 2 complete lances of his mechs. All he had left, was three lighter mechs, a medium mech and his own heavily damaged BattleMaster. Even as the lighter mechs came around the dropship to rejoin him, receive a panicked radio call from the infantry he had deployed to secure the area.

"Major! Were under attack by thousands of militia, we're falling back to dropship. The militia is being supported by...." In a screech of static the radio transmission died.

Brown turned his BattleMaster quickly and scanned the perimeter of the landing field the dropship was on. As he was looking he saw eight

armored vehicles race out from behind cover on the south and west sides, and fire blossom from the front of the vehicles as they engaged his mechs. He saw his two lightest mechs stagger as the rounds impacted on their armor. Even as he engaged and destroyed one of the armored vehicles with the last two surviving medium lasers on his BattleMaster. He saw what must have been more than 50 missiles being launched from the lighter vehicles, following the larger armored vehicles, and from the roofs of a dozen nearby buildings.

The missiles all homed in on the sole surviving wasp, and shattered the mech's armor in a series of explosions that mangled the one of the mechs arms and damaged the torso. Adding insult to injury the five surviving armored vehicles fired at the wounded mech, three of the shells fired by the tanks impacted on the remnants of the wasps armor destroying it. The last two shells slipped through gaps in the armor and shredded mechs internals.

"All units retreat back into the dropship." He ordered.

As the lighter units raced back to the dropship, Brown turned back to fire at the pursuing armored vehicles. He managed to destroy another armored vehicle, and saw a particle beam from the dropship vaporize another. The three surviving armored vehicles return fire at the BattleMaster, two of the shells impacted on structural elements in the torso and damaging nearby systems. The last shell damaged the mech's gyro, and caused the Major to begin to lose control of his mech.

He managed to pilot his failing mech back to the dropship and halfway up the ramp to the largest mech bay before the gyro gave out, causing his Mech to crash to the ground with its head in the bay while the rest of mech lay on the ramp preventing the bay the doors from being closed.

Major Brown came to a seconds later, and he realized the crash had caused the blackout for a moment. He hauled his bruised and aching body out of the cockpit and was helped to his feet by a technician.

"Give me your radio." Brown ordered.

Grabbing the radio the technician handed over he began to issue a string of orders.

"I want the the Stinger positioned at the end of the bay, it's a hose down any enemy infantry that make it into the bay, however it's not to open fire until I give permission. I want the PhoenixHawk to drag my Mech into the bay, but it is not to starts pulling my Mech in until I give the order. All technicians are to vacate the bay and all surviving infantry are to set up barricades and prevent any enemy infantry from gaining access to the rest of the dropship."

Assured that mech bay could be held against any enemy infantry for some time, Brown rushed to the bridge of the dropship. A minute later he reached the bridge where he was greeted nervously by the Captain.

"Sir," the Captain said nervously. "We're picking up a radio call demanding our surrender."

Brown snorted, "Surrender. You know as well as I do Captain, that they'll execute us as pirates. And we can't retreat because of the nukes in orbit."

He spoke loudly addressing the rest of the crew on the bridge, who had been listening intently to the conversation. "There can be no surrender or retreat. Victory is the only way out of this mess."

He addressed the Captain again. "There is a much greater number of militia than we expected and they're wearing our forces down too quickly. If we continue to fight them as we are now where going to lose simply through attrition. The only way we're going to be able to win this now, is by putting ourselves in position with it can't attack us but we still kill them."

Brown look to the Captain intently. What I need to know, if it is possible to take off and hover about a kilometer above the ground. We can't get too far from the city or else they will nuke us, but we need to get into position where we can't be attacked from the ground."

"Yes it is possible." the Captain answered slowly. "But it is not something a dropship is designed to do, therefore don't expect us to be able to race around like an aerospace fighter. If we're just hovering, the dropship will not be very maneuverable, and I don't think that we will be able to get more than 20 or 30 kilometers per hour out of the maneuvering thrusters if you want to move the ship around while hovering.

The Major gave a dark grin, "Good, that will give us a way to destroy the militia from the air with the dropship's weapons. And once the militia destroyed we can hover over the city and demand their complete and total surrender. And if they refuse we can blow up some of those larger buildings until they agree."

"However," he cautioned the Captain, "you're not to take off until I give the signal. I want to, lure as many of the militia as is possible in close, and let them attempt to storm the ship. Once they are all in close I want you to use the dropships main drive like a flamer and burn them all."

The Major waited patiently as the militia approached the dropship, he could see that there were several thousand men on the field. They were spread out to prevent the dropship's weapons from being able to take out more than one or two men at a time. He knew that they could see his damaged mech spread out across the ramp and preventing the bay doors from being closed. He knew that it would provide an irresistible opportunity for the infantry's commander. Brown knew that it was a rare opportunity for anyone to encounter a dropship that could so easily be stormed by infantry in a battle. He also knew that they didn't have anything short of a nuke that could take out this dropship, which therefore made it impossible for the militia's commander to not try to storm the ship.

As he waited, he could see the militia's infantry beginning to gather under the dropship, using the landing struts for cover, as they pushed the last of his infantry back into the dropship. The rest of the militia's infantry rapidly advanced and took up positions around the landing struts and under the dropship where they could take cover and repel any assault that came out of the dropship. The position the militia took was also so close that the dropships weapons were unable to

depress far enough to target the sheltering infantry.

Even as the rest of militia's infantry were reaching the dropship. Several companies were forming up for an attempt to storm the dropship. Moments later the group of several hundred militia stormed up the ramp, right on the heels of a volley of LAWs that have been fired into the loading bay. The impact of the LAWs blasted craters in a number bulkheads and shattered several barricades that the pirates' infantry had set up. The hail of shrapnel resulting from the explosions swept the bay and killed more than a dozen of surviving infantry in the day. Seconds later teams of men armed with M-16's stormed the bay opening fire on anything that moved. Hot on the heels of the first group of men came dozens of men carrying satchel charges and explosives.

A moment later the pilot of the Stinger which had been hiding in the next bay over, reported that the militia was attacking the barricades and trying to force an entrance deeper into the dropship and requested permission to open fire.

"Negative," Major Brown responded. "Just a more seconds."

The remaining infantry on the field seeing their comrades entering the mech bay or gathering under the dropship, charged forward as fast as they could run eager to get to a position where they could avoid being shot at. As far as the Major could tell more than 2000 militia were clustered around the landing gear and entrance ramp to the mech bay while more of the militia raced up the ramp eager to join in the battle happening in the loading bay."

"Lift off, Now." The Major told the Captain. "And use the drive plume to kill as many as of the militia down there as possible."

He also radioed for the mechs to, return to the loading bay from the bays in which they were hiding and open fire on the infantry crowding into the bay, and drive them out of the dropship. He also ordered the pilot of the PhoenixHawk to drag his BattleMaster all the way into the dropship, once the bay was clear of infantry, so that they could close the bay doors now that the ruse was finished.

Chicago Midway international Airport
Chicago, United States
Earth

Colonel Anderson watched in horror as the main engine of the dropship came online, and fired the infantry gathered around and under the dropship, as it began to lift off.

He grabbed the radio man next to him and ordered him to call command and let them know that they failed to capture the dropship and it was retreating. As the dropship lifted off, he noticed that instead of continuing to accelerate up into the air, it began to slow down and came to a hover at about three or four thousand feet up.

"Oh Hell!" He said as he came to a realization of what the enemy commander was trying to do. Once the dropship stabilized it seemed like the rate of fire from the ship doubled. Lasers and particle beams chased and destroyed the vehicles that had survived the assault, while autocannons and missiles began pulverizing all the buildings surrounding the runways.

He glanced over at the ashen faced radio man next to him. "New orders," he said. "All units are to scatter and retreat. And tell command we going to need heavy air support with lots and lots of anti-ship missiles."

As the radio man sent out the new orders Anderson watched the dropship finish the destruction of the buildings around the runways and began to chase after the more intact units retreating to the north.

Anderson looked over at the radio man when he grabbed his shoulder. "Sir," the corporal said. "Command says a second Air Combat Group is on the way and will arrive in thirteen minutes, and we are to hold as best we can until they arrive."

Anderson swore as he looked back the dropship, "Tell Command I'm not sure that there will be anything left by the time they arrive, and ask if it is possible them for them to arrive any faster."

Air Combat Group (Bravo)
120 miles outside of Chicago
United States,
Earth

The F-14s raced ahead of the F-16s on their way to Chicago. Their engines screamed as the pilots kept the planes at full afterburner pushing their planes forward at speeds which were almost beyond what their designers had intended at lower altitudes. The pilots commending the F-14s waited impatiently for the dropship to enter the range of their Phoenix missiles, they knew there was an enemy attacking an American city. A minute later when the dropship entered the maximum range for their Phoenix missiles, all 12 of the F-14s launched their full complement of missiles at the dropship.

Seventy two missiles raced forward for the dropship at over Mach 5, the missiles climb for altitude as they arrowed for the dropship. At a point nearly two thirds of the way to the dropship the missiles engines burnt out, and the missiles nosed over and dove from almost hundred thousand feet towards the dropship. A minute later the missiles impacted on the dropship. Explosions blossomed along the dropship's armor shattering several tons of armor along the dropship flank. However the scattered nature of the impacts prevented any of the missiles from penetrating the thick armor of the dropship.

Seven minutes later the twenty two F-16s which had been racing after the F-14s, reached the maximum range for their missiles. Although, it took some effort to convince their air to ground Maverick missiles, that a flying dropship was an acceptable target, they soon had missile locks and fired. They launched a volley of 132 Maverick missiles at the dropship.

Unfortunately the dropship had seen them coming and had rotated an undamaged section of armor to face the oncoming missiles, while it tried to shoot the fighters out of the sky. Once again the scattered nature of the impacts prevented the missiles from blowing a single large gaping hole in the side of the dropship. However, as the missiles blasted more than 8 tons of armor off the side of the

dropship, several missiles managed to achieve a limited penetration of the armor and do some damage to the underlying structures. Unfortunately, this did little more than inconvenience the dropship even though it did destroy a couple of weapons and do some internal damage.

The F-16s broke off their attack on the dropship immediately after they had launched. The pilots of the second air combat group were extremely lucky in that only three of them were shot down, this was due to the fact the dropship provided an unstable base to shoot from. Therefore the gunners on the dropship were unable to get a good shot at any of the wildly maneuvering fighters at such a distance.

Air Combat Group
40 miles outside of Chicago
United States,
Earth

The four B-1 bombers cruising at 50,000 feet helplessly listened with dismay to the reports of the battle ongoing in Chicago. The reports at the second air combat group had failed to bring down the dropship, despite having a full load out of missiles had thrown a dark gloom over the pilots. The failure of the air attack against the dropship, was followed by more reports of the dropship destroying homes and apartment buildings and other structures as it attempted to utterly destroy the retreating forces.

The Commander of the bomber element hadn't dared approached the dropship for bombing run after seeing how effective the dropship was at shooting down small maneuverable fighters at a range outside of the bombs which they were carrying.

He had privately cursed the decision to go with the shorter range laser guided JDAMs rather than for something with a longer range, when they had discovered the fact the dropship could shoot down aircraft at a range of more than 20 miles.

However, he quickly noticed the fact that after the dropship had lifted off it hadn't managed to hit any of the attacking fighters

launching missiles at it. Despite the fact it had managed to hit the attacking fighters at the same range when it was on the ground. It quickly became obvious to him that they were having some stability issues making it impossible to easily shoot down any approaching fighters because the dropship was no longer a stable which to fire from.

With this new knowledge he decided that now would be a good opportunity to try a bombing run an attempt to destroy the dropship. The problem, however, would be that the bombers would have to enter range of the dropship's weapons before they could deploy their bombs. Given the facts that the bombers were much larger than the fighters which had been shot down and that it was nowhere near as maneuverable, he knew that they would definitely need an escort to draw the fire and help spoof the sensors.

The Commander opened a channel to all units. "This is Knight One, to all aircraft. All available aircraft with electronic countermeasure systems or chaff pods form up on Knight flight for escort mission."

The Commander of the second air combat group quickly responded. "We've exhausted all missiles and will be unable to provide any defense."

Knight One responded. "We need an escort that can provide a chaff corridor and increase the amount of electronic countermeasures around our bombers or worse simply provide the dropship with other targets to shoot at. So whether or not your planes are armed are not doesn't matter, since the use of missiles doesn't seem to be able to bring the dropship down. We just need a chance to get close enough to try our hand with several dozen 2000 pound bombs which are hard target penetrators."

The radio silence for a long moment. Then the other Commander signaled his acknowledgment. "Knight One, you have escort, we'll be joining you shortly."

Several minutes later the B-1 bombers were joined by the planes of the second air combat group, minus three of F-16s that had been shot down by the dropship as they launched their missiles, which had

turned back from their mission to return to base and rearm.

"Knight Three, this is Knight One." The Commander of the bombers said. "You have command, give the go order when you're ready."

The radio was silent several seconds, then Knight One quietly but firmly gave the order.

"Execute."

On receiving the signal, the 31 fighters acting as escort broke off from where they were circling in the air at 55,000 feet and headed straight towards the dropship. The four B-1 bombers followed closely behind the accelerating fighters. The fighters formed a screen constantly maneuvering targets ahead of the bombers, while they dropped clouds of chaff to break up any radar returns and confuse the dropship's sensors.

As the group of planes approached the dropship, they were noticed and shortly thereafter particle beams and lasers rose to meet the accelerating group. Once the pilots knew they were in range of the dropship they engaged their afterburners accelerating even faster towards the dropship, and in some cases accelerating beyond the designed maximum speeds as they dove towards the dropship to accelerate and also present a smaller cross-section to shoot at.

The fighters kept accelerating towards the dropship flying in more or less a straight line towards the dropship, taking evasive actions as they dumped clouds of chaff and flares in an attempt to fool the dropship's sensors. The B-1s following close behind the fighters had to trust in their jammers to fool dropship's sensors along with the clouds of chaff and flares dropped by the fighters to shield them from detection.

As the planes got closer to the dropship more and more weapons were diverted from firing on targets on the ground to trying to knock out the group of rapidly approaching aircraft. Despite this, the air group only lost a single fighter to the dropships weapons as they closed the range.

The pilots only realized just how successful the combination of clouds of chaff along with a number of electronic countermeasure systems was, when the dropship apparently frustrated with its inability to get clear target or shoot down more fighters began gaining altitude and accelerating towards them.

Knight Four, seeing that the dropship was rapidly gaining altitude as it headed toward them. Knowing that the higher the dropship got the closer the bombers would have to get to hit their target, raised the question of breaking off the attack.

Two more fighters were rapidly lost as they closed the range to the dropship which was now slowing its ascent now that it was better able to target the fighters. The bombers which had been diving towards the dropship to avoid exposing their ventral surfaces to the dropship and to minimize their cross-section. Now realized with the dropship now at about 20,000 feet the chances of pulling off a successful bombing run were rapidly shrinking.

Seeing the rapidly shrinking chances of successful bombing run, and knowing if they were to break off now the dropship would have a much better chance of shooting them down as they exposed the ventral surfaces of their aircraft as turned away. Knight Three radioed his commanding officer.

"Knight One, this is Knight Three."

"Yes, Knight Three?" The Commander of the B-1 detachment angrily asked, frustrated with his inability to do anything to improve the chances of successful bombing run.

"Sir," Knight Three said. "You know as well as I, that if we break off now it would be a turkey shoot and that our only chance is successful attack on the dropship. If we're unable successfully bomb the dropship, one of our bombers should be big enough to bring the dropship down, therefore my crew and I will ram the dropship if our escorts can get us close enough."

"What?" The Commander asked incredulously.

"We'll kamikaze the dropship, Sir." Knight Three said. "The crew voted, we have to try this, we can't stay up here and do nothing while thousands of people we are sworn to protect are being killed down there."

"Very well then." The Commander said. "We'll ensure you have the chance."

As the bombers raced closer it became rapidly apparent that any chance they had of successfully bombing the dropship was gone, now that it had reached about 27,000 feet.

Seeing the chances of successfully completing a bombing run on the dropship gone. The Commander ordered all of the aircraft to do a close flyby of the dropship to provide screening for Knight Three on his approach and prevent any of the aircraft from breaking off their attack run so close to the dropship and creating a bigger target by exposing their ventral surfaces towards the dropship.

As the planes got to within several miles of the dropship, the close range improved the accuracy of the dropship gunners, five more planes were vaporized by the dropship's lasers and particle beams. As the range rapidly closed, the dropship launched swarms of LRMs and opened fire with its autocannons at the wildly evading fighters. The combination of weapons brought down an additional seven aircraft. Only 16 fighters survived to whip past the dropship at a distance of several hundred feet while moving at more than 1000 miles an hour.

The passing of the fighters allowed the dropship to see the real threat of the diving bombers heading at them at more than 900 miles an hour. Weapons were frantically retargeted as the dropship attempted to shoot down the oncoming bombers. Lasers and autocannons managed to hit two of the screening bombers. The third bomber, screening the kamikaze, whipped past the dropship at a distance of less than 500 feet.

Knight Three, its four engines screaming at full power as they continued to accelerate the 300,000 pound aircraft with their afterburner on. The bomber was traveling so fast that it was nearly falling apart from the speed it was traveling as it crossed the last few

hundred feet to the dropship.

The surviving planes heard someone begin to recite the Lord's Prayer moments before the bomber impacted. For the people who saw the impact of the B-1 bomber, it appeared like the dropship was hit by a flaming spear thrown by an angry God.

By chance the Bomber hit the dropship on one of its sides which was completely undamaged. This fact allowed the dropship's armor to resist the impact of the bomber for about a nanosecond longer. As the Bomber punched through the shattering armor, the armor slowed the wreckage of the 300,000 pound aircraft from slightly more than 900 miles an hour to only about 500 miles per hour.

Adding insult to injury, the twenty four 2000 pound, hard target penetrator, bombs within the plane did not slow down. Like a round of double ought buckshot the bombs, tore their way through the wreckage of the plane, before they punched holes through the dropship from one side of the dropship all the way to the other.

By chance one of the bombs bounced off the dropship's fusion reactor, knocking it out of its position and causing an emergency shutdown. The dropship which had been hovering at more than twenty five thousand feet, in full view of hundreds of thousands people, spluttered, died and began to fall. When it hit the ground it leveled the residential block it landed upon, and sent debris flying which ravaged a number of additional blocks.

The destruction of the dropship brought the pirate invasion of Chicago to an end. But left several square miles of rubble and wreckage to mark its passing, one totally destroyed airport and tens of thousands dead.

Jumpship Zeke's Folly
System S3-19570410
Motherlode-Sun Pirate Point
14 November 3020/2005

Over a decades worth of experience would have let Danny feel even an skilled pilot detaching from the *Folly*. Considering the way the deck shuddered Danny severely doubted in the pirate pilot's skill. But he didn't much care, so long as the sub-par pilot hadn't damaged anything, other than to be pleased he could now work in peace. Worrying about drunken pirates, or worse greed mad pirates that might try to seize a Jumpship, always gave a hit to the crew's efficiency.

"Oy! Pete, I'm off to make sure the fool dirt lovers didn't scratch the paint. I meet you to check on the sail and power converter after."

"What, don't trust your fellow dirt lovers Danny?"

"Yeah, right, Pa wouldn't have trusted that so called pilot with a broom. We may have been starving, dirt loving, mercs, but you better believe we had at least a little pride."

Danny laughed as he worked his way down to the collar. He still felt a little twinge of pain at the reminder, but he was sure Pete hadn't meant anything but friendly joking. *Damn but I hated you for it at the time Pa, even that young I somehow knew you didn't really mean it when you told me I'd be staying behind as a marker to guarantee payment. Don't know how you knew you wouldn't live out the day, but something must have warned you.*

Looking over the port docking collar's local displays Danny sighed and tapped at the intercom controls. "Port collar's boom receptacle lights are all green, but I've got a warning on the collar power line. Those cheap mud crawlers must be skimping on maintenance, looks like breaker twelve isn't just tripped but blown. We'll have to put in a spare and rebuild this one. I vote we tell them their stuck with their own generators on the way back."

"Noted boy, but do *you* want to be the one to tell them?"

"Not hardly."

"Didn't think so. Power converter's next on your list, call when your ready."

* * *

Shaking his head Danny reached out and snagged Pete as he bounced by. "What the hell, you sneak a double hit of coffee?"

"Nukes!"

"Huh?"

"Janie just called me. That dirt ball has nukes!"

"Right. Like anyone will believe that bluff."

"No bluff, they've already fried two of the droppers. If they throw any this way..."

"You're joking... You're not joking? Aw hell, come on, lets check the converter and pray those parasites we carried keep everyone too busy to look at us. If we trim back our usual safety margins... Aw crap, who knows what Captain Bipolar will do. Either by the book and leave us sitting here, or try to cut so many corners we'll misjump into the local star.

"Tell me, why the hell did Captain Clarisse have to go and get pregnant again?"

* * *

Bridge of Jumpship Zeke's Folly
System S3-19570410
Motherlode-Sun Pirate Point
15 November 3020/2005

"Not good enough! Not good enough by half! Do you want to stay

here in this mess? We have to get out of this nightmare system!"

"Uncle Les--"

"Captain! On duty you will call me Captain!"

"Fine. Captain. You know as well as I do we still have seven days charging before it will be safe to jump. How are we going to run? Use the station keeping thrusters? What's your suggestion, sir, get out and push?"

"Furl the sail and start charging with the power plants."

"..."

Danny froze for a second in the hatch, only years of practice telling his body to move and clear the way. "All do respect sir, have you *ever* tried that?"

"Shut up boy, this doesn't concern you. Why are you even on the bridge?"

"He has a point."

"I'm just bringing up the maintenance reports. It's on the schedule Captain."

"Like hell he has a point, what's a planet loving merc brat know about navigation? Just leave the report and get back to work boy."

"Fine, you're right Captain. We can finish charging in less than half a day. Just so long as you don't care about your atoms landing in a dozen different systems."

Daniel shook his head as he left. He'd studied every manual he could get his hand on and studied as much math as he could to try and understand it. Half to keep his mind busy and half to make himself as useful as possible. *I can't even come halfway to passing the family's Nav test and I know better than that. Get the charging wrong and we'll be lucky if we just lose the charge and have to start over.* He paused in the

passageway and considered the last tear down. "No. No way, bad enough just fixing the normal wear."

Back on the bridge

"Fine. Keep the sail up. But start trickle charging off the power plant. Just keep an eye on it and keep an eye on that damn planet. If things keep going wrong I want us to be the first out."

Democratic Republic of the Congo
20 Kilometers West of Kinshasa
One Kilometer North of Death From Above Landing Zone
15 November 3020/2005
11:40 AM

The UN APC shuddered to a halt behind a nearby hill. The Lieutenant leapt out, and walked up the hill, hoping that there were no windows at the top of the enormous egg of metal that dominated the local vista.

The Lieutenant crawled the last 10 meters on his stomach, keeping visibility to a minimum. He then brought out his binoculars, and surveyed the pirate ship. He was expecting guards, security, even a razorwire fence. What he found was.... Nothing. The egg sat there, with it's ramp down, and not a single security measure in sight. The Sergeant spoke up.

"Well, Lieutenant? What do we do now?"

10 minutes later.....

The UN APC rolled at a steady pace down the hill, went straight to the ramp, and rolled up it. It then pulled over to one side, and the men it carried hopped out. They were greeted by the cleaners.

"I am Lieutenant Alexander Malkavian, representing the United Nations Peacekeeping Force. You are directed to surrender immediately!"

The reply, unfortunately, was not in English.

"Uh. Huh. Well, perhaps French."

He repeated his speech, In French, this time. This reply was in another language again. Then, one of his men spoke up.

"Sounds like Japanese, Sir." The Lieutenant gave him an odd look.

"You speak Japanese, Harrison?"

"No, Sir. I had a Jap girlfriend once, that's all."

The Sergeant once again spoke up, preventing their officer getting distracted, as usual.

"We can fish for blackmail later, Sir. Common language?"

5 minutes later, there was a small crowd of drop crew, and they had found that one of the drop crew spoke Arabic, as did the Sergeant. This was the only shared language that they could find. The Lieutenant, looking utterly exasperated, looked at his Sergeant.

"Tell them to surrender. If they try to leave the planet, they'll be nuked. if they stay here, they'll be bombed. If they go anywhere else, they'll get spanked!" This was followed by quiet mutterings that nobody was sure they really wanted to understand. The message was passed from the Sergeant to the cleaner who spoke Arabic, to the Crew chief, then through the internal communications system, and finally to Captain Chuin. The return message, going through the whole system in reverse, was that Captain Chuin would come down and deal with them in person.

Everybody settled down. This would be done in a few minutes.

7 Minutes later.....

Elevator doors opened, and a tall asian in a red silk top and black pants entered the room. The Lieutenant turned to his Sergeant, and spoke, irritation coloring his words.

"Well?"

Captain Chuin replied.

"Well, young soldier? What can I do for you?"

"You speak English?!"

"Certainly."

Pause. Sigh.

"I am Lieutenant Alexander Malkavian, representing the United Nations Peacekeeping Force. You are directed to surrender immediately."

The silk clad Captain gave him a odd look.

"And why should I?"

"Because you cannot leave the atmosphere without being nuked. You cannot fly anywhere else without being a target. And if you piss me off any further, I'll have my men throw a satchel charge at every corner!"

"Very well. I surrender. Would you like a drink?"

"I surely would, Captain."

Lieutenant Malkavian gave a withering look.

"Shut up, Harrison."

Democratic Republic of the Congo
1.7 Kilometers North of Kinshasa
15 November 3020/2005
1:40AM

Mechwarrior Cameron Liao was really starting to get frustrated. It was like a minefield! he couldn't go more than 20 paces before running into more of those PBI's! Fine, their rockets were pretty pathetic, but- 'Crack-boom' FUCK! There seemed to be no end of them. He swivled around, and a beam of coherent light fried another bunch.

This was ridiculous. They were actually GETTING THROUGH HIS ARMOR! Fuck this.

He moved, pushing his Locust up towards 100 Kph, dodging the occasional explosive, before spotting the nearby City. 'They'll stop shooting so much in there', he thought. Suddenly, his Threat Computer, for the first time on this planet, spoke up. "Shit, what now?" He slammed on the breaks so he could work out what the fuck it was going on about.

The T 62 tank spoke, from about 2 Kilometers away.

"FUCK!" Ignoring the computer, when there's a decent BOOM! not five meters from your mech, you respond. Cameron swung around in a desperate move, and triggered both Medium lasers, making his mech unpleasantly hot. Only one of the lasers connected, but the tank ceased to be.

That was when he noticed the pair of VTOL's swooping in. And he had far too much heat to swat them! 'Ok, ok, I'll just accelerate away, cool down- 'Crack-boom' FUCK! What is with these PBI guys?! That actually did some damage to my left leg!' He moved away, testing out the damaged machine's current limits.

'Ok, 80 K's seems to be the limit right now. At least I got into the city. They won't fire in he- 'Whush'....'Boom!' Well.... At least they're having trouble hitting me at this kinda speed.'

'Ok, everything has cooled down enough, I'll find a good spot to take the VTOL's. Wonder what Valentine's up to? He's probably in the city, he always did like them. Hmm- 'FLASH! KTHUMMMMMPP!!!' The Locust managed to keep it's footing, but only just.'

"HOLY FUCK!" 'Ok, I think Valentine's gone in a big way. That won't happen to me! I'll just duck around- Hey, target-'Squish'- this corner, turn, I'll take these VTOL's out!'

He ducked around that corner, spun in place, and fired the moment his target was in his crosshairs. That didn't stop a volley of rockets launched his way.

'Gotta jump out of here!' Suiting thought to action, the Locust was

actually off the ground before, with a massive BOOM!, the World went insane, rolling like nothing he'd ever seen before. Then, as the Locust came to a sudden stop, he continued, his last sight being the instrument panel he was headed for at high speed.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

North End of Kinshasa

15 November 3020/2005

1:44AM

"This is Billy-Bob Thornten for CNN, reporting live from Kinshasa, the Capitol city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and as you can see"-

The camera shifted, looking down a street, as a giant metallic figure strode along, beams of light smashing into buildings, in retaliation for the rockets being fired at it from various windows. rumblerumble-KRACK-boom! Could be heard, as an entire apartment block collapsed in on itself. Broken figures and rubble could be seen littering the ground.

"We are watching" Huff, Huff, "something horrible, as this massive figure" Huff, Huff, "shows no respect for collateral damage." The reporter and camera man had dashed down the street, to continue filming the action.

Half a person fell out of another building.

They turned a corner, and focused once again on the Mech.

"This is incredible footage, coming live, as pirate forces att- Wait, what's that, it's gesturing towards-" There was, from a pair of abandoned highrise buildings, their windows long since shattered on each side of the mech, a massive horde of con-trails, rockets, converging at once.

"This is insane, what an explosion! It's still up-" KaBOOM!!!, as something inside the mech went up, and the damaged machine

staggered.

"I think, yes, I think it's beaten. The locals have WON!-" There was a glow inside the staggering mech, then a FLASH!-Static.....

-Interrupted at source-

Democratic Republic of the Congo
South End of Kinshasa
15 November 3020/2005
1:45AM

"This is Ray Palmer for BBC, we are currently on location in the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. There is a mass-"BOOM!!!!

"What!?" The camera swivles toward the sound, just in time to see a mushroom cloud.
thump.

"My God, that's a Atomic Explosion! That's. That's. I have no words!"
The camera moved
Thump.
so that you could see both the reporter
THUMP.
and the explosion.
THUMP!!

"Can you see that?!? Tell me you're get-"
SQUISH!

The camera swung to watch a mech with blood on it's feet dash past at well over 60 Kph, being followed by a pair of low flying Hind gunships. The mech ducked around a corner, followed by the choppers. Con-trails! A beam of light lashed out, a Hind exploded, and the other one salvoed what appeared to be it's entire arsenal. There's a explosion, and a chunk of mech half the size of the chopper smashed it from the air.

At the same moment, the mech seemed to fly up into the air, spinning like a demented pinwheel, fusion fire coming from it's remaining leg. It spun crazily for about 10 seconds, before coming down in a horrendous CRASH!

The camera is put down, and another figure steps into view.

"Well. Umm..... Well, fuck." Tape ends.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Palace of President Kabila

15 November 3020/2005

1:55 AM

" Mr President! It seems to be over. Our forces have defeated those, those monsters!"

"I never doubted it. But, I didn't expect a atomic explosion INSIDE Kabila, either." Sigh. "Give me a run down, General?"

"Well, Mr President, I'll start with the known pirate forces. That included somewhere around 150 motorcycle riding fools, 12 trucks, 7 of which had some improvised armor, and 2 giant robots, those 'Mechs'. All those have been defeated by our valiant army, at considerable cost, I might add."

He took a sip of his drink, and lent back into his comfitable chair.

"The cost? Well, that's not fully known. But it is extensive. Both of our T62's, Both of our Hind's. 5 of our MiG21's. Including one piloted by my youngest son."

At this, he had to pause for a moment. The President waited patiently.

"Perhaps one and a half thousand of our troops. More than that in civilians. This, this was BAD." He finished his drink, and got up for another. He glanced at the President, and was rewarded with a slight

shake of his old friend's head. With a new drink, he went back, and sat down.

"And it should have been much worse."

"WHAT!?"

"Oh, yes, Mr President, we faced morons. Had we opponents with brains? That would have been far worse for us."

The President stewed on this for a minute.

"Explain. Now." The voice contained quite a bit of ice.

"They charged headlong into our defenses, acting more like old women fighting to be first at getting the bargain's on Market Day."

"You must be exaggerating!"

The General, looking remarkably solemn for somebody in neon pink and green, shook his head.

"Not at all. The only reason they did so much damage, was that their armor and weapons were far more potent than ours. If they had any idea what they were doing....."

"I se-"-rrrrrRRRUMBLE-SMASH!

"What's" BOOM!

"Going" Whosh BADADADADA-BOOM!!

"On?!?" The whole building shook, and a member of the President's personal guard entered in a massive hurry.

"Quickly! We must go NOW!" He yelled, and a number of his fellows, surrounded their President as they ran through the building, away from the continuing firefight. Explosions continued to be heard behind them, along with considerable weapons fire.

They ran through the building, and as the guard's opened the door in front, they cursed, and tried to slam it shut. The President noticed a pair of figures in some sort of armor before the door shut. Moments later, the door blew into kindling, killing all but one of his guards. The last one started to hurry him the other way, except that another pair of armored figures stepped into view that way, too. Everybody froze.

One of the figures spoke in a almost whimsical tone.

"If ye'd be so kind, I'd like for ye to surrender now."

The President did. And with him, the Congo.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (New Name still Pending)
The Palace of (Former) President Kabila
15 November 3020/2005
2:40 AM

"Everything ready?"

"Yep."

"Good. Broadcast."

Click.

"Hello, Congo. This is your new rulers, The Imperial Goat's of War, and I am their Commander, General Tiberius Kirk. We have taken your Palace. we have taken your President. We have defeated your best troops. We now own this land. And if you chose to disagree..... we will take your life."

Click.

Epilogue
Democratic Republic of the Congo

**20 Kilometers north of Kinshasa
UN Peacekeeping Force Encampment.
16 November 3020/2005
9:02AM**

"Sir, President Kabila is deposed. The pirates own the Congo at the moment, even the local Army isn't interested in fighting back. We keep the peace with the co-operation of the local government. I'm not sure we can get that. What do you want us to do?" Colonel William Thatch rolled his eyes, and visibly restrained himself from ranting at the petty bureaucrat in a uniform that was at the other end of the sat-phone.

"Very well, Sir, we won't antagonize them. I'll ask permission for us to stay. If the don't want us to?" Mumble.

"Very well, if they don't want us here, we leave. Anything else, sir?"

It took another 20 minutes before the Colonel could get off the phone, and away from the Champion of Political Correctness.

**Democratic Republic of the Congo
20 Kilometers north of Kinshasa
UN Peacekeeping Force Encampment.
16 November 3020/2005
9:23AM**

"Attention, Imperial Goat's of War. This is Colonel William Thatch of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force. Please respond." There was silence over the radio, for a full minute. Then, a cold, high, voice replied.

"General Tiberius Kirk here. What can I do for you, Colonel?"

"General, I have a small multi-national force here in the Congo as Peacekeepers. You are currently in charge of this area, and my people can only do their jobs with your permission. If you ask us to leave,

we will."

"I see. You have 48 hours to leave the country. If you are still here after that, we will kill you all. Over and out." Click.

"Well," said Colonel Thatch, looking at his Sergeant, "that went well." There may have been the very slightest hint of irony in his voice.

The Encampment was packed up, all Westerners nearby were offered extraction, and the evacuation took place within schedule.

Death From Above took the lot of them to the place it was directed to, that being the UN Peacekeeping Force Encampment in Israel.

This bunch of pirates had won.

White House Secure Bunker
Washington D.C.
15 November 2005/3020

General McMayers hurried over to President Ryan and said "Mr President, I have a Sitrep and a request for a tasking that was immediately kicked up to the National Command Authority level. Apparently, the incursion in Oregon has been entirely eliminated, and the forces responsible are asking for a transponder code for the captured dropship, a clear flight path to Houston, every EVA trained astronaut NASA has available, and at least a company of infantry for prize crews. They also want permission to grab two of the orbital launchers on the way to the pirate points."

"Approved upon positive confirmation of the unit's identity. I thought that we had nothing more than infantry units in the area, and everything that might have been able to respond was being diverted to the battle in Los Angeles?"

"Mr President, as you know, the Rainbow special operations force was designated as the first multinational component of GDI. Because of our agreement with New Zealand, our functional mechs were attached to that command. There was a breakdown in communications, and they weren't listed under available US forces, since they aren't in fact US forces. The officer in command ordered them to engage the enemy using their own judgment to attempt to hold them in place. I have a detailed report, but as usual, CNN got their video to us first, and are asking permission to broadcast. With your permission, I'll run the tape."

The footage that followed wouldn't have been out of place in a live action mecha show, if there had ever been one with decent production values and a worthwhile special effects budget. President Ryan steepled his hands as he took in the events, before saying, with a pained expression on his face "That wasn't one of the captured pirates, we had psych profiles done on them, and none of them are that fundamentally insane. Which means that a military dockworker just eliminated seven battlemechs singlehandedly during his first combat action in the cockpit."

"Ten sir, the CNN crew wasn't able to maintain continuous coverage of the action because of the conditions. This isn't a hoax Mr President, much of the action was recorded by our predator drones, and the results were verified by local light infantry and law enforcement as well as satellite sweeps."

"General, so far today I've seen an assault mech captured using military rations, and a pirate group decide on its own initiative to fight to the death in defense of one of Earth's cities, I have no trouble believing what I just saw. The problem I'm having is that there's no way I can avoid inviting him to Camp David now, and once he's there there's no way I'll be able to keep Sally off of him."

General McMayers paled upon hearing that, and said "Mr President, I have teenage daughters of my own. If you want, I can cut orders to ensure that he stays in orbit for the foreseeable future."

Liberated Pirate Ship 'Great Justice' **16 November, 2005/3020**

The last few hours had been nightmare for everyone on board the dropship. The captured pirate crew working under guard had experience with high gravity burns, but none had ever sustained one for this length of time. The soldiers and astronauts had been in better overall shape, but didn't have the experience of trying to move under those conditions. Already, there had been more than a dozen injuries, and more seemed inevitable.

Still, the basic objective seemed to have been achieved. They had 'fought off' several supposed attacks by the US Air Force to get to the notional weak point in the network of orbiting missiles, and burned a half-dozen obsolete and nonfunctional satellites out of the sky from extreme range to add more verisimilitude. The first pirate Leopard to attempt to follow them had been nuked over the Atlantic as Earth's force worked to correct their mistake, lambasted publicly throughout

the proceedings by the news networks. At that point, the ship began burning like a bat out of hell towards the main group of jumpships, shunning the close in pirate point since the Buron Cav's Union was already closing on the lone ship there.

Instead of trying to grab launchers from orbit, they had simply quietly loaded up the next group scheduled for launch, while ostensibly 'looting the area'. The collection of troops was a hodge-podge of everything that had been immediately available, ranging from the Navy Seals and Special Boat Squadron teams that had been in the US when the pirates attacked, all the way down through a platoon of National Guard MPs who'd been nearby and available to fill the remaining empty seats. Plus, of course, Rainbow Team 'Bruce', with Staff Sergeant Dansel attached.

Certain individuals had attempted to take issue with the fact that no less than three of the team members had crippling injuries, while Dansel seemed to be certifiably insane. The fact that he appeared to have to be physically restrained from attempting to leave to acquire another mech from a battlefield was certainly off-putting, as was his assertion that 'These forty foot armor plated killing machines are all the same, one swift knee to the happy-sacks, and they drop like anyone else'. The more practical minded Special Forces personnel administered a quiet word to the doubters, and in a few cases, a not so quiet session of wall-to-wall counseling, to the tune of 'you don't argue with results'.

However, it was generally agreed that their decision to attire themselves in 18th century pirate costumes was in particularly bad taste, given the events still happening planetside. Regardless, no one was eager to press the point, since no one could determine *how* the costumes had been acquired with no notice, much less smuggled onto the ship. That the peg leg, hook, and eyepatch were all completely functional simply gave added emphasis for people not to push their luck.

The illusion of a particularly lucky pirate ship running for their lives was dispelled for the jumpship flotilla, as the recently rechristened *Great Justice* applied the last bit of emergency overthrust to come to a stop just outside effective weapons range of the Invaders, and

transmitted "Greetings on behalf of Motherlode. We kindly ask that all personnel not essential to keeping your ships from immediately falling into the sun take to your small craft and follow the transmitted directions exactly. Any attempt to furl your sails in preparation for jump or resist boarding in any way will result in us poking a few holes in you ships. In the event that you successfully destroy this dropship, the nuclear armed missiles we are leaving outside your range will destroy you all. No backchat please."

Predictably, the Band of the Damned was unable to restrain itself from uttering a series of blustering threats, at which point they learned that while they were outside of the range where a PPC could reliably damage a ship's hull, their jump sail was far more fragile. Things went much more smoothly after that.

**Bloor and Yonge Street
Toronto, Ontario; Canada
70 Ft. Down**

22:35 - General-Electric Military R&D Bunker

The lights dimmed again, and the building shook. Professor Roger Stag, formerly of NASA, surveyed the monitors arrayed around the room. Feeds from across the world, of invading battlemechs, of dropships, and even a fuzzy image of the boat they'd arrived in were displayed.

Roger wasn't the only engineer GE had shoved into this tiny little room- a tiny little room in a tiny little building. But most of the others were either sleeping, or doing something else to pass the time away while who knew how well the fight was going in the city above.

The floor shook, and the lights dimmed again.

"Damnit all," he cursed, slamming his hands into the table before him. The motion startled some of the other workers, who stared. "I've got to do something- I can't just lie here, waiting to die."

"You could always lend us your expertise, Professor," interjected a clean, friendly voice. He quickly identified it as a Miss Roslin, a school teacher one of their escorts- finely trained men at the door- had found wandering the subway system outside looking for a stray child. So fascinating it was that she could have a challenge for him, but anything to break the monotony of this... tomb.

"Alright, I'll bite. What is it that you could want little old me for?" he asked, turning. But Laura didn't reply immediately, instead leading him to a little conference room through one of the many doors in this... hallways of evil.

The lights dimmed, darkened, then the harsh red emergency lighting took over.

"Perfect," muttered Roger. "Like a haunted funhouse, only ten times worse because there's an Intruder class dropship sitting right above us, and we're all likely to die."

"-t that doesn't make a lick of difference guys, the- oh, there's that sunny disposition I told you about," said a younger scientist- one that Roger recognized almost instantly.

"Meridith," he muttered.

"Nice to see you too, Albert. Not that I'll let your appearance do anything less than add to the suspense," he replied, turning back to his audience. "So there I was, one man- one civilian against the terrorist cell. But I had my wits about me and-"

"You're telling them the tale of how you're actually Iron Man," Roger interjected. "Why am I here?"

"Nooo- hey, good question. Why is he here?"

"Well, I had thought that perhaps you two most esteemed scientists might be able to work together, rather than bicker," Laura said smoothly, mediating. Meridith puffed himself up a little at that. "You did tell me that GE had hired you to work on the Droship contract GDI gave them. Professor Stag here worked with NASA, if I recall his introduction correctly- perhaps he could help you with the practical theory."

"For your information, I have a perfect grasp of the practical theory. I just don't see why it factors into theoretical discussions," interjected Meridith. "But nevertheless, I will lower myself to making the effort."

He turned back towards Roger.

"Albert, it pains me to even suggest this, but perhaps you can help," Meridith mused. "We're discussing, as the good lady said, a dropship contract from GDI. A very vague one- and here I am, alone against a legion of unbelievers that-"

"The point, Meridith," Roger interrupted.

"Rodney," 'Meridith' said, pausing. "The point is that it's clearly the better choice to build larger dropships and take advantage of our advances in miniaturization, then it is to build small, cheap, and fast dropships that will likely get everyone killed. That's the point, but unfortunately these idiots refuse to see it."

Those 'idiots' remained silent on the issue, or rather, unconscious, being asleep.

"Meri-Rodney. It's quite interesting, because I agree with you. While you might be here to work on dropships, I've been contracted to start working on the designs for an Earth produced Jumpship, and my team was having this same argument, before," and he gestured upwards. "They landed and started making mincemeat of our security escort."

"Well obviously you...wait, wait, what? You agree with me? That never happens," Rodney stuttered.

"Go suck a lemon, it surprised me too," Roger replied in turn. "In any case, I think the first thing we need to do is work on this jumpship issue of mine- and then design dropships to fit its specifications."

"Not on your life, this is my think tank, we're going to do things my way-"

Dropship *Shadow Wing*
30 miles north of Roswell
New Mexico
Earth
15 November 3020

"Bridge, Dark Wing Six," Sanders said as he felt the Dropship slow for landing. "Give me a sitrep. What's the situation on the ground, Jim?"

"Dark Wing Six, Bridge," came the instant reply. "Immediate LZ looks clear of any living soul. There's some kind of town about 48 kilometers south of our position, so any locals there will probably have seen us come down."

"Okay, what's the terrain like?" Sanders asked as he felt the Dropship touch down.

"It's pretty flat," came the cheerful reply. "Not much cover so we can see and shoot at anyone trying to get to us. It's also a bit warm. It's your basic scrub brush desert."

"Wait a minute," Sanders said slowly. "Are you telling me you set us down in the middle of nowhere with nothing the locals might consider too valuable to destroy?"

"Yes... is that a problem?"

Visions of being in the middle of a nuclear dart board danced before Sanders' eyes.

"No.... not at all," Sanders replied. "Just make damn sure you maintain good air watch and don't let any of the Motherloders drop a nuke on top of you."

"Uh..."

"Now let us out," Sanders growled. As the Dropship doors opened and the mech cradles released the Mechs, Sanders asked, "Where can we expect hostile resistance to come from?"

"There's what looks like a militia airfield about a few hundred kilometers to the southwest. I've sent a pair of our aerospace fighters, the *Sparrowhawks*, to check it out. The *Shilones* are currently flying CAP over the LZ."

Holloman Air Force Base
New Mexico
Earth

"Sir, I have a pair of hostile bogies inbound at Mach 1.5," a radar tech reported.

"Hrm, any sign that they've noticed the *Nighthawks* or *Raptors*?" General Brian Bass asked. The planes had been launched when it became all but certain that one of the invading Dropships would be landing in his area of responsibility. Not that it made him happy. Tests had shown that stealth could be effective against BT sensor suites, but the only stealth planes in existence didn't have internal missile bays big enough to accommodate the new anti-BT air-to-air missiles. So for aerial combat, they were going to have to rely on the older missiles modified for contact detonations. No one really expected those to do much against these flying tanks.

"If they have, they're not giving any sign of it, sir," the tech replied apologetically.

"Okay, then," Bass said thoughtfully. He turned to his flight control people. "All planes are to not engage enemy fighters for now. Order them to proceed to the LZ and maintain a position within strike distance while waiting for the attack order. And for God's sake, try not to get spotted by them."

"And the inbound bogies, sir?"

"Engage with every SAM we got," Bass answered. Those were expected to work perfectly fine. He studied the radar image. "Hmm. Have the SAMs stand by and have them ready to fire on my command. Let's see if we can't lure them a little deeper into our web, said the Spider to the Fly."

Dark Wing Recon Flight
New Mexico
Earth

"Damn it, there's another one," Josh "Raven" Kress swore.

"There just sensor ghosts, Raven," replied his wingman, Jean Paul "Crow" Demarco. "Must be more of that lostech we heard about. The Motherloders are trying to screw with our sensors using ECM or something. Ignore it."

"Okay, okay," Kress grumbled. "*Shadow Wing*, this is Raven. We're almost on top of the base now and no resistance so far. I'm seeing lots of runway so far and that's about it. Are you sure this is a military base?"

"Wait a sec, Raven," Demarco broke in. "I'm getting a lot of radar sources pinging us, way too many to be some civilian airfield."

"Then why haven't they fired on... HOLY SHIT!"

A virtual tidal wave of missiles rose up from Holloman Air Force Base below as every AA missile launcher vomited fire at the pair of light aerospace fighter intruding on their air space. And these weren't the swarms of small missiles that the two aerospace pilots were used to seeing. These missiles were big, in some cases almost as big as their fighters. That alone made them very intimidating to people who were used to missiles no bigger than their arm.

The aerospace pilots were very good. They reacted immediately and attempted to evade by pulling up and away. But they weren't good enough. They couldn't possible be. For a start, they had started out heading towards the missiles which reduced their window of response. Second, the missiles also possessed far better acceleration than their machines that needed to be concerned with such trivia as pilot survivability. Third, the fantastic heat their fusion exhaust generated made it ridiculously easy for the missiles' seeker heads to home in on them even without radar assist from the ground. And finally, there were just too many of them to evade.

Even though they were "light" fighters by BT standards, both *Sparrowhawks* were armored well enough to take a couple hits even from these missiles. But more there were more than a couple missiles and each *Sparrowhawk* was hammered by dozens of such missiles.

In Kress' case, this was pure overkill as one missile stuffed itself into a tailpipe before exploding. Kress died as his fighter was turned into a massive fireball.

Demarco was luckier. He managed to eject even as his fighter was disintegrated by the multitude of shockwaves from impacting missiles. And by some miracle, none of the flying shrapnel flying about hit anything vital on him or his ejection seat as he punched out.

Debris rained down on Holloman, doing some damage to the buildings, but not much, and nothing of any significance. And there was Air Force Security Forces waiting to greet a thoroughly scratched and bloodied Demarco when his parachuted self touched down.

Shadow Wing LZ

New Mexico

Earth

15 November 3020

Six *Battlemasters* accompanied by six mere heavy mechs of the Dark Wing's First Mech Company spread out around the *Shadow Wing* to cover all approaches to the Dropship. These mechs had been the foundation of Sander's mercenary career, salvaged from an ancient Star League weapons cache. There wasn't much in the way of advanced lostech, but the mechs and weapons were in good condition which was more than could be said of many mechs in the Inner Sphere in these fallen times.

And now for all Sanders' knew, these mechs could be all that was left of the Dark Wing. He knew at least one Dropship had been outright destroyed by surface to space fire, but of the rest, especially the *Drakon* which was carrying the Dark Wing's dependents, he was in

the dark.

Damn the Motherloaders and damn Vorax too, he thought. He had suspected that this job was too easy, but he never in his worst nightmares expected to see nuclear weapons being tossed around.

And now there was that mysterious base that had shot down two of his *Sparrowhawks*. The Dropship hadn't been able to see much, but thought that the fire was likely to have been from fixed defenses. The *Sparrowhawks* had reported that the base had looked mostly empty before they had been shot down. And given that only a blind man could miss the *Shadow Wing* landing, that meant that whatever forces were housed on that base had already left the base and were coming for them. But they couldn't be heading in a straight line for the LZ or else the *Sparrowhawks* would have seen them. So they must be taking an indirect route to try and catch Sanders by surprise. Only, where were they?

"*Shadow Wing*, this is Six," Sanders said over the command channel. "Any signs of the locals yet?"

"Nothing yet, Six," came the reply. "The *Shilones* are watching the ground like hawks and they're not seeing anything except what's clearly civilian traffic, and not much of that either. On the other hand, we're starting to pick up sensor ghosts, so we think the locals are starting to play ECM games with us. Either that or all our scanning equipment is packing up at the same time."

"I don't like this," Sanders muttered. "The locals have to be out there. Tell the *Shilones* to widen their patrol pattern."

Something blipped on Sanders radar, but was gone before his mind really registered it. Just a sensor ghost, he thought. But it could be an indication that the locals were screwing with his *Warhammer's* scanners, which would mean that they must be close. He scanned the terrain in the blip's general direction but didn't see so much as a truck.

It didn't even occur to him to look up.

Dark Wing Air Patrol

New Mexico

Earth

Denise "Nightshade" Kurosawa made another pass over the stupid little town in her *Shilone* aerospace fighter. The *Shilone* was a flying wing design and carried a respectable weapons load for a medium fighter. The only problem was that there was nothing to use those weapons on. After her ride got nuked, she was just itching to return the hurt that these supposedly "primitive" yokels had given her people. Unfortunately, the bosses all insisted that she keep a lookout for actual military threats, so strafing that town was out of the question for now.

"This is useless," she complained. "There's no army out here waiting to pounce on the ground pounders. We should just go in and get that base."

"They're out here, Nightshade," replied her wingman, Jack "Spacebat" Hernandez replied. "I can feel it. And this ECM we're getting hit with proves it, even if it is behaving a bit weirdly."

"That's probably just some camouflaged van with ECM gear parked in the middle of this desert," Kurosawa replied, leaning back in her seat. "Cause I ain't seen anything like an..."

It was only the fact that her head was tilted back that allowed her to see it. At the same time a sensor ghost momentarily appeared on her radar display, a black speck cruised across her line of sight, darting from one cloud to another. For a moment, Kurosawa wondered if she had just imagined it when another pair of specks appeared. Her eyes darted to her radar display which remained blissfully unaware.

"Aircraft!" she shouted in, anxiety rising up. She gunned her engine and started climbing. "I have aircraft is our AO and they're above us!"

"Nightshade, what?" Hernandez replied. "I'm not reading anything."

"Nightshade, this is *Shadow Wing*. Can you confirm contact with local aircraft? Our radar isn't showing anything."

"Neither is mine, but I saw them," Kurosawa insisted. "They're using the clouds to stay out of sight and... There's one!"

The black shape couldn't have been more than a couple kilometers away and she was behind it. It should have been an easy shot. But her missiles failed to lock on and went wide. Her large laser while close, missed and must have alerted the other pilot that he was being shot at because the plane jerked away in an obvious evasion attempt. Kurosawa scowled when she realized that in addition to being radar invisible, the local plane was also not generating an IR signature that she could lock onto.

In other words, if she wanted to hit the damn thing, she was going to have to get close enough to it to not miss.

"Nightshade, we're still not seeing anything. Spacebat, are you seeing anything?"

"*Shadow Wing*, I got nothing but... Sweet Jesus! I just saw a fighter of some type, and it's not showing up on my radar!"

"That's impossible!" the guy back on the *Shadow Wing* protested.

"Impossible or not," Kurosawa said as she lined up for another shot at her quarry, "that seems to be happening. The locals have..."

Alerts blared at Kurosawa as suddenly dozens of radar signatures appeared on her display. Only they weren't local planes, they were missiles. On reflex, she threw her *Shilone* into a barrel roll to evade the missiles. It didn't help; Kurosawa was rattled as her fighter endured a bombardment of armor chipping missiles. Individually, the missiles were light and not very damaging, about on par with an LRM. But there were so many of them hitting in so many places, and Kurosawa gritted her teeth when she saw the status light of her rear mounted SRM go red.

Two dozen black, flying wing shapes zipped by under her. Kurosawa was about to turn and pursue them when she was suddenly bombarded by bullets from still more planes than her idiotic radar

insisted weren't there. And then more missiles came at her.

First Mech Company
***Shadow Wing* LZ**
Earth

"All mech units, we have hostile aircraft incoming from the south. Aircraft are invisible, I repeat, *invisible* to radar! Use visual targeting to engage!"

Sanders' head snapped up at the preposterous message from the *Shadow Wing*. He quelled the instant protest that came to his lips; why, with purely visual targeting, his people would be lucky to hit targets at a few hundred meters, never mind fast moving aircraft!

But even as he quelled that thought, his eyes locked onto a formation of black specks skimming under the cloud level. His eyes darted to his radar and confirmed that they were indeed not showing up there. He laid crosshairs across a speck and triggered his PPCs. Both artificial lightning bolts reached out... and hit nothing, not even a cloud. Sanders saw a few other PPC bolts reach out and even a few lasers, again with equally depressing results.

Suddenly a blip appeared on Sanders' radar, but it was tagged green. As he watched, one of his *Shilones* popped out of a cloud to spear one of the local aircraft with lasers. The unlucky plane exploded and then the *Shilone* turned away. Sanders was wondering why when a horde of sleek shapes – also not showing on radar – appeared out of the same cloud bank firing missiles and guns after the *Shilone*. Something vital must have been hit because there was a large fireball that staggered the aerospace fighter and sent it on an unsteady downward spiral.

"Okay, boys and girls," Sanders said grimly over the tactical net. "Looks like it's up to us. Pick your targets and before they start their bombing..."

Alarms blared as new radar signatures appeared. Sanders gawked as now visible bombs came raining down on his people from an impossible distance.

Sanders didn't know it, but he and his people had been well within bombing range for quite some time. The F-117 Nighthawks basically had to find their targets on their own since the partially cloudy weather had made it difficult for spy satellites to spot all the ground units that had been deployed. On the other hand, they had had plenty of time to find all the mechs operating in the open ground and their stealth abilities had let them search without getting shot at.

And then that lone BT fighter had spotted them. With cover blown they had been given the go ahead to begin their attack run while the escorting F-22 Raptors kept the enemy fighters pre-occupied. The Nighthawks were still thirty miles out when they deployed their JSOWs at what was for them, point blank range.

The Joint Stand Off Weapon was a missile with a 150 kilometer range that delivered a cluster bomb to a desired target. Each one deployed dozens of smaller bomblets which while individually small, could do a great deal of damage when added all together. The system had not been given a high priority in production lines because a) it was assumed that BT standard armor could easily resist the bomblets and b) because the things were bloody expensive. What made them expensive was that each bomblet when deployed had their own homing capability to steer themselves to an enemy target once they were deployed. As for damage...

Dozens upon dozens of the bomblets rained down on a mere twelve mechs and almost none of them missed. Although they were among the most heavily armored mechs ever produced by the Inner Sphere, the Dark Wing's armor quickly abraded away. Equipment was smashed, weapons destroyed, even whole arms blown off. Still, the mechs survived in damaged but still usable conditions.

Their pilots on the other hand, were a different story.

A quirk of Battlemech design made their heads thinly armored and difficult to hit at the best of times. But hitting them wasn't nigh impossible either. A good many of the JSOW bomblets struck mech heads. A few completely imploded. But most didn't take enough bomblets to be completely destroyed, but instead sprayed shrapnel

that broke loose inside the cockpit and transmitted concussive shockwaves through armor. A good many mechwarriors died under the abuse and even if they survived, the additional shock of their mechs falling over and hitting the ground was usually more than sufficient to push them over the edge into mortality.

Colonel Antoine Sanders got lucky, although he wouldn't feel so for several months. His own Warhammer was hit with fewer bomblets because one of the bombers targeting him was destroyed before it could deploy its JSOWs. So he was "only" knocked unconscious by the unending rolling thunder resonating through the cockpit with only a moments thought toward the indignity of being shot at without being able to fire back.

November 14th 3020/2005
Low orbit
On approach to planet "Motherlode"
Bridge of the dropship Drakon

"...etting a message from the surface. It's Captain Hale!"

At those words, Jane whipped her head around hard enough to pull a muscle in her neck - eliciting a wince of pain – and whack her new fiancé in the face with her ponytail. The surprise in her voice was almost comical.

"Hale?! How is that possible? He should be dead!"

"Glad to hear I've been missed, Ms. Dietrich, though rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated." Captain Hale's voice drawled from the bridge speakers, voice dripping with sarcasm. Jane's face reddened as she realized that the com officer had accepted the transmission in time for him to hear her shocked outburst.

"Not that we aren't happy to hear you're alive, Captain," Koltan broke in, to Jane's immense relief, "but how exactly did you manage to survive this long, much less get your hands on a radio?"

"It's a long story, too long to be told in the time we have at the moment, and most of it too wild to believe without seeing it per..." some hushed muttering came over the line, and Captain Hale was soon back on with a far more urgent tone to his voice. "Listen folks, the natives are getting restless, and restless people with thermonuclear weaponry are a Very Bad Thing, so I suggest you surrender before you become one with the universe, in the rapidly expanding cloud of super-heated gas sort of way. I can guarantee you will be treated humanely as they seem to place a value on Human life that is sorely lacking in the Inner Sphere. No torture, starvation or anything else like that. Hell, I think Dana's even dating one of them!"

It didn't take long for them to reach a decision. Some crew-members objected on the grounds that Hale might have a gun to his head and

was lying about the whole deal, but they quickly retracted their objections when Jane politely inquired if they enjoyed running through nuclear minefields.

"By the way, is Mamoto still with you?"

"Ah," said Koltan, glancing at the captain's chair, where a technician had seized the opportunity presented and was drawing a ludicrous looking mustache on Mamoto's face with a permanent marker. "More or less."

"What do you mean... ah forget it, you can tell me later, I owe the dumbass a beating for abandoning us anyway." More hushed muttering came over the mike, and Hale came back on with a slightly irritated grumble. "Okay boys and girls, I gotta run, one of the locals will give you landing coordinates. See you dirtside, Hale out."

Soon afterward a new and unfamiliar voice came on the mike, ordering them to land in a desert approximately twenty clicks east of a small but apparently well-defended military installation they called 'Area 51'.

"Well, when I woke up this morning, I certainly didn't expect **this** to happen." Jane mused as they began their final approach to the LZ. "Yet somehow, I have a feeling that today is going to get a lot weirder."

Koltan was about to respond when a new - and quite unhinged - voice shrieked, "TAKE THE OFFER!"

The entire bridge stared in undisguised astonishment at the dropship's erstwhile captain, who appeared to have momentarily regained a measure of lucidity.

The stunned silence was broken by Koltan's sarcastic grumble. "Little late for that, *Captain*." Mamoto, however, did not notice, as he had lapsed back in to a state of empty catatonia.

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Written with edits by Psychosama, hope you guys like it!



Tokyo, Japan

Earth

17 November 2005 (Home Islands time)

The general looked down at his notes before looking back at the assembled Japanese cabinet, prime minister Koga was staring at the pictures in the folder before each of them, as if daring the universe to fix its accident. "Ministers, yesterday the only invading drop-ship, a Leopard, landed at Tokyo International Airport, or more commonly known as Haneda Airport, as per our projections."

A picture flashed up on screen detailing the Home Islands, with numerous circles covering every square centimeter of land. One set detailed anti-air systems defending the cities, others covered the airbases and their attending fighters' range, another set detailed the naval ships and their anti-air systems. "Reviewing the planning in brief, we had re-activated all anti-air defenses in cities, while upgrading them to be effective against the armor on ASFs and drop ships. We covered more rural regions of the coastal area with our naval ships to provide blanket coverage. Denying the enemy a gap in our defenses to land and attack from."

A new image came up with different circles, few covering large amounts of land. "This is the expected quick reaction range of our current forces. As you could expect, our rural Army bases and naval ships have a much greater range compared to our bases situated in, or close by, cities. We expected the enemy's projected reaction was to attack towards the greatest concentration of material wealth. Thus, most rural bases had a lower priority compared to city bases."

A new image flashed up, showing a mass of green areas all over Japan. "These are the projected landing sites that could be used for either a 'Overlord', a 'Mule', or a Leopard class drop ship. After further review and consultation with the US and their prisoners we narrowed down the landing sites."

A well over half of the green vanished from the picture, "These areas were removed due to poor location and restriction to battlemech operations. These remaining areas were graded for quick selection

based on a drop ship coming in under fire from the orbital... systems."

The cabinet shifted slightly at the reminders of what was above their heads. Koga seemed unmoved for the moment at the reference. "Continue general, our allies have shown to be more responsible than some of our countrymen in regards to those weapons."

Having the grace to not blush, only to clear his throat, the general continued, "Yes, prime minister, we then applied a secondary grading system based upon the distance to wealth. Using those results we fortified likely landing areas, while setting up supply catches at local police stations for resupply of the Army units engaged in fighting."

"The harbor areas proved to be difficult to successfully mine with ships and heavy populations nearby. A series of camouflaged containers were stored in all major ports, usually occupied by company size units. Tokyo bay had seven containers, with 150 soldiers armed heavily with anti-tank weapons, and man portable anti-air missiles. Airports had their denial abilities increased, with mines deployed in two phases intended to first mine the area, then to hide their existence from attackers. All public shelters in high risk areas were re-certified and personal brought into line regarding the new threat."

Looking up he continued, "At the current time of the attack, all grade A sites had most defensive measures applied, with airports behind the projected timeline for phase two. Work was beginning on grade B-2 sites. Offensively, virtually all A sites had IVF equipment ready for an attempted capture, or to perform a holding action, but only a few had work done for tanks. Haneda Airport unfortunately, didn't have work done to prepare the site due to the island like nature of the airport."

A plot flashed up, showing the attacking drop ship as it dropped from orbit, in addition the plot showed acquisition radars as they flashed on attempting to gain lock on the ship as it came ever closer. "The Leopard, now identified as Daedalus, was identified as it performed a three g reverse thrust as it approached the atmosphere, attempting to force its way though the orbital systems. The ship was then forced to keep a low level flight path due to the number of target locks we

would attempt to acquire on it as it gained altitude. As expected, our few warships were out of position, guarding against the possibility that the invaders would go for a location outside the cities. We had about 15 minutes from the point where it gained a stable altitude over the ocean going hypersonic."

"The single Leopard class drop ship incoming was deemed to be a viable target for the Spider's Parlor plan. The aircraft were fueled and loaded with a mix of weapons for long range air to air for a possible ASF still stored in the ship, the other had laser guided bombs fitted to their racks. Fighters already airborne were directed away from the ship's likely detection area at full thrust. Civilian aircraft were diverted away from the Greater Tokyo area."

"What the hell is THAT!!" Lisa yelled as the first missile launched. The old drop ship's computer looked at the missile, looked at its old missile profile charts and tossed back its best guess.

Beyond Lisa's theoretical knowledge of 'capital missiles' in the distant past and what they tried to use against them to throw them off, nobody in the IS had actually practiced those measures for well over a century. Still the counter measures weren't too different than normal missiles. Daedalus's engines gained a more energetic tone as the dropper surged forward at 2 gees. Attempting to gain enough speed and energy to out-fly the missiles, while still being able to set down on the planet.

"Captain? Roy from the hanger is calling." One of the group's dependents said, while his hand tried to keep the head phones on his ears despite the additional gee trying to pull them off. Despite the talk of theorists, spacesuits in a battle tended not to work too well, unless they were of the exceedingly rare military verity, they simply tore too easily.

"Put him on." Lisa grabbed the bulky handset from the arm rest feeling like her arm and the phone massed 15 kg.

"Lisa, just what is going on up there?! We-"

The first nuke going off ripped Lisa's attention from Roy, almost causing her to drop the phone. The sensor operator was cursing up a storm in a cold panic, even as she relayed the information. "Roy, prepare for a hot insertion, things just went from bad to worse up here."

Tilting the phone away Lisa looked at her comm operator, "Begin hot insertion warnings NOW! Begin maneuvering and recalculation of entry location immediately!"

"Roy, " Lisa began, talking back into the phone again as warnings started to sound though the drop ship. "Somebody is throwing around nukes, if Max can't launch now, he isn't getting off anytime soon."

Lisa tilted the phone away as Roy started cursing loudly on the other end before the line went dead.

Roy cursed as he slammed the phone into its cradle besides the hanger door. Max hastily climbed past him moving against the ship's thrust as he tried to race to his LAM before the ship started to put up an evasion pattern, and make launching too risky, at 2 gees acceleration he wasn't moving too fast yet. Rick and Ben were already in their cockpits, Rick looked like he was trying to get in touch with Lisa though the mech's comm system, and Miriya was trying to rush up the ladder from her spot she had been talking with Max at.

Roy reached his ladder just in time for the ship to start twitching. His hand holds on the ladder stopped him from being bounced around the hanger, but he was tossed around a bit. Rick and Ben rode out the movement nicely secured in their cockpits. Miriya got bounced around the inside of her cockpit as she tried to hook herself up.

The painfully slow and careful process of getting into and secured in his cockpit took an agonizingly long time. Moments afterward his comm system put up Lisa who simply passed him a direct message from Azonia. Who was having to calm down a worried Claudia off

screen.

Starting his message back to calm her down, the forward thrust finally stopped, only for the entire dropper to twist around and have its engines ramp up to 3 gees to attempt to kill its velocity before the ship over shot the planet. Grunting at the forces, Roy began a message back.

The drop ship roared over the ocean as it made its way to a heavily populated island chain. Hopefully, the relatively protected nature of the island chain would slow down any reinforcements the local government could move in. A wake of disturbed water was left in its wake as the hypersonic ship tried to reach its target before local forces could be moved against it.

The curvature of the planet forced Skull Squadrons to use old orbital images to determine landing/targetting points. Not to mention keeping them out of the loop for information on the rest of the invasion forces. Lisa looked over the data coming in as they closed in on the island chain's biggest concentration of people. Which likely contained the vast majority of its forces, also would contain the majority of its wealth.

Sure they could land outside of the city, or at another city, but that would allow the local forces time to gather and move in-force on them. Hopefully landing there would vastly hinder the local's movements and play to Skull Squadron's ability for maneuver warfare. From the original briefing on Antallos, the biggest threat was aircraft and numbers.

Well, being inside one of their major cities would defiantly make the locals reluctant to drop bombs or do strafing runs on them. The squadron could use the restrictive nature of city fighting to avoid allowing the natives to mass forces against them as landing in the open or another city might allow them to do. The locals would no doubt find their lack of mechs to be a serious problem, without the ability to bring down a mech quickly their forces would be chewed up piece meal in quick and vicious city fighting.

As radar acquired the city, Lisa quickly scanned the area around it on radar for anything flying. Even a few of those armor-less fighters could mess with their plans, forcing her to turn away and slow down to launch Max safely so he could deal with them. Costing them valuable time and momentum.

A few large single contacts on the radar were moving away from the city, but nothing was in the air above or around the city that came close to the fighters that had been encountered the first time, granted the city likely had some very good anti-air abilities. Thus, flying over it to a target deeper in the city was out. It just seemed too good, but they simply didn't have time to wait around. Choosing a landing spot in the harbor, that looked something like a strange spaceport, Lisa directed the Daedalus into its newly chosen target.

The general paused for breath, "At the point where the 'Daedalus' was on the ground. The JSDF started to launch aircraft in surrounding regions to cut off escape and provide support to ground forces if needed."

"Move, move, move!" Roy yelled over the com as the Daedalus rolled to a stop. Switching command channels he called up the Leopard.

"Lisa! How is Max?" The maneuvers and shear speed of the planetary entry and atmospheric flight made launching the squadron's remaining LAM a unsafe bet. Even for Max, who seemed to have a natural affinity for the finicky machine. Losing Max, despite the pain it would cause the company, would not hurt as much as the loss of the LAM. Stinger LAMs were rare and precious just by themselves, not to mention the quality of pilots needed to operate them, especially to any merc group that specialized in light lance work. They were fortunate enough to have a hanger queen LAM on the stripped down Prometheus that was still attached to the jumpship, that Leopard had taken engine damage that they hadn't been able to repair yet. For pilot replacements, most of the unit could take Max's

position, even if they were slightly worse at it.

Lisa's annoyed voice came back over the command line, "You know the issues about fitting a LAM into a ASF slot, its not going to be faster to take it out. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes to avoid damage. I've got the PBIs guarding the ramp until we can finish pulling the Stinger out. We aren't leaving here anytime soon anyway."

Roy rolled his eyes at the pointed remark, "Yes, yes, find the nukes controller and disable it, and if you don't mind, take care of the rowdy locals. You get that old crate back in the air ASAP after you get Max out. I don't like our ride out of here just sitting around with a huge target painted on it."

Switching back to tactical before Lisa could attempt to chew him out about him doing her job, Roy called out, "Ok, Max is coming in late, take guard positions, hopefully this won't take too long." A series of confirmations came back to him from the others as they moved.

The general showed a fuzzy satellite picture of the group. "Sorry for the poor picture quality ministers."

All the ministers winced at that. Nukes, even from friendly nations, did not play nice with satellites. Replacements in the following years from all governments were projected to at least triple, not counting commercial interests. Koga waved on for the briefing to continue.

"The explosions in orbit have degraded our abilities for a while there, full effects to our systems are still being analyzed. After their landing at Tokyo International we waited until all the 'mechs' that a Leopard was estimated to carry entered the mined area of the of the airport's taxi surface."

Another image overlapped the photo, showing a massive area with widely spaced lines, and a few areas with tightly spaced lines along the edges. "Our airport mining efforts were able to place the required number of mines, but covering up the cut lines in the taxi-way was proving to be more time consuming the initially projected."

A new picture came up, "Nevertheless, we were able to disable most of the mechs within seconds of activating the mine system for the airport."

The was replaced by a shaky video without sound, the mechs were attempting to guard the open door to the Leopard, while trying to take shelter in the shadow of various buildings. Moments later, supports of the buildings facing the mechs that were using them as cover, exploded. Three of the mechs reacted instantly, spinning with the building's fall and kicking in their jump jets. The remaining mech, a Valkyrie was buried under parts of a hanger and a car port.

As two of the remaining mechs came down they had the unfortunate luck to land on one of the buried mines as they tried to keep their jumps short. Two sets of 250 kg of high explosives detonated, ripping one of the legs off each of the mechs, while shredding the remaining one.

"At this point it was viewed that the mine field was more of a danger than a help to our forces, with all but a quarter of the group disabled, a second signal was send out to deactivate the mines. Infantry stationed on roof tops a block away from the airport targeted the Phoenix Hawk as it performed a second jump, attempting to jump into the city proper. It was targeted by roughly 50 modified Type 91 shoulder fired missiles fitted for contact detonation. Roughly half of them were detonated prematurely by the jump jet's exhaust."

Another picture showed the Phoenix Hawk with its jets smoking as it plunged below the skyline. "It was damaged heavily by the fall and was then captured relatively intact. The Leopard surrendered shortly afterwards, under threat of artillery. During the capture it was discovered that they had half extracted a LAM from what is assumed to be an ASF launch bay. We captured that one without any damage."

A new pictured showed the half extracted LAM. "I have included initial estimates for removal time of the mechs. Pictures of downed mechs and their pilots are included in this, along with drop ship commander."

Ben took up position in his Valkyrie, in a slot between a long building and a car port. Miriya's Wasp took position kneeling behind a similar building off to Ben's left after she shot a few rounds at the tunnel leading onto the airport from her end. Roy and Rick took positions on the other end of the sunken/tunnel road way. Hidden behind the set of sparse hangers and office buildings, making sure to cover their flanks by blasting the tunnel's openings to collapse them.

Roy looked over the wide open expanse before them. Providing a perfect line of fire for them, checking his radar for aircraft, none. Something was off, the reports of the Drakon had the Motherloaders being much more reactive than... A set of set of sharp cracks focused his attention as the building in front of him started to lean towards him.

"JUMP!!" Roy yelled out over the coms as he punched his jump jets for a fraction of an instant. Sending him rocketing away from the building. Two other bright dots followed him backwards, Ben was on the coms screaming in horror. Roy was barely aware of his voice yelling for them to jump forwards and into the city as far as they could.

Shear moments after landing, two explosions shock the area as Miriya and Rick went down. Roy hit his jump jets at full power. Ignoring Lisa's screams for what was going on, reaching the top of his arch, Roy was almost disappointed at the wave of small missiles at him. He felt he rated a armored thrust by them.

The missiles swerved around the front of his mech and... his jump jets' light went red as he rattled around inside his cockpit like a credit in a beggar's tin can. Then he began to fall into the wide open area of the airport runways he had been looking down just moments ago. Next was blackness.

"General," one of the ministers began, "as much as we appreciate this. We must not fall too far behind the US in capturing a jumpship."

Koga looked at the minister in question, "President Ryan has shown to be a excellent ally, attempting to rush military operations based on political concerns have 'proven' to be counter productive as my 'replacement' learned."

The minister bowed slightly in shame, "But you do have a point, general, what is the current condition in attempting to proceed with joining our allies in their capture operations? Also, unlike our allies, I hope we haven't renamed our new possession like the US has. While 'Great Justice' is ironic, it is not a message I wish to send the world. Attempting to rename the ship Yamamoto is even more absurd, Japan needs to save that for a true warship. White Base has possibilities for our first locally produced drop ship, but until that time..."

The general coughed slightly, catching a twinkle in the prime minister's eye. The air of the table lost its sharp edge of embarrassment at the joke, the general nodded, seeming to be slightly more embarrassed at the ship's name change mention. "Yes, prime minister, we have been delayed because of the lack of a strategic initiative, thankfully the on-site officer. A Misumaru Yurika was able to take command of the situation."

A female officer flashed on screen, looking like a militarized Tendo Nabiki from the anime with a sarcastic smirk. "She was delayed from taking off as soon as she moved the battalion under her command onto the captured drop-ship, excluding a platoon and the local police to guard the newly captured personal and mechs, by the arrival of researchers from all over Tokyo to look over the captured equipment. A second battalion is being flown in as of an hour ago, along with increasing numbers of police to take control of the captured personal and secure the area. Her current est..."

A newly familiar rumble shook the building, out the window a newly captured Leopard was trying to climb vertically into space. "...is right now." He said with a weary tone at the sight.

Forcefully tugging down his shirt he continued as the rumbling faded. "Yes, on another note ministers, we have informed the US that we have sent out salvage teams to locate the position of the sunken

Overlord."

The minister for the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology perked up at this mention of future research materials. The other ministers looked happy that they would have potentially total access to the only 'Overlord' class drop ship on Earth. Even if it was in pieces on the ocean floor, given the engineering standards those drop ships were built to, it was assured that quite a lot of the ship would survive.

Prime minister Koga, coughed slightly, as the table refocused on him. "General, His Majesty the Emperor wishes to know, with this problem dealt with, consideration upon the time for removal of defensive weapons in the Imperial Palace should be in order."

Roy Gunter, commander, pilot of the "Phoenix Hawk"
Rick Cocker, pilot of the "Stinger"
Ben Mallery, pilot of the "Valkyrie"
Miriya Parina, pilot of the "Wasp"
Maxe Parina, pilot of the captured LAM (identified as Stinger LAM).

Lisa Cocker, commander of the Leopard

* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokyo_International_Airport

Notes: Miriya looks almost exactly like her Macross name sake. Her green eyes are actually a dominate genetic trait, her hair is permanently dyed although. Plus the fact that she is just under two meters tall.

This is a generational outfit, as too many other mech warriors tend to be too risky with their scout mechs. For them, glory is being able to see your kids grow up. Rick and Lisa have a kid, Miriya does too, but it may or may not be Max's (if he's gay he might not care). Roy has been dating the commander of the Prometheus for so long its almost a joke. Of course, by Earth standards they are common law married.

Masjid al-Haram
Mecca, Saudi Arabia
Earth
14 November, 2005

Tears streaked down the face of Ibn Ahmed as he struggled to take in the display that he'd seen this day. The king had gathered the faithful to the holy Kaaba to prey for the courageous *Mujahideen* who would be facing the accursed *Hirabi*. Then they discovered that that the criminals had decided to attack Holy Mecca itself. Their teeth had gnashed in rage even as the fear of death enveloped them, and while many would loose faith, they instead turned to Allah for salvation, and in His infinite mercy, Glorious God had delivered.

When the four machines and the flying soldiers who accompanied them had arrived to do battle there, had been cries of tears from women and children, thinking that their time had come, but then, oh but then Allah's mercy had been made clear to all as the leader of these brave heroes of Islam spoke and swore to fight to the end to protect the faithful and the most holy of places, and uplifted their souls from the depths of sorrow to resounding joy at the miracle before them. These were not raiders, but warriors from the stars sent by the hand of God himself, descending from the sky like the angels of heaven, carried upon pillars of flame. Oh God was truly great!

Then the warriors fought, out numbered they fought to the last, their machines being torn apart by the terrible volume of fire from the enemy. Even when all seemed lost they still held, never turning away, and so the faithful prayed, prayed that their glorious saviors, begging Allah to allow them to live.

He began to cry tears of joy. One of their heroes machines had exploded, after many of the soldiers had been cut down, only the massive form of the leader's machine still stood against the onslaught, and all seemed lost. But then, for the second time, there had been a miracle. From the sky swooped the Air Forces of the world, raining

down fire like Allah's own vengeance cast from the heavens! It must have been every jet in the Middle East! The Saudis, the Syrians, the Jordanians, the Egyptians, the Americans, even the Israelis had come to protect the city! The damned pirates, may their eternal souls roast in torment, stood no chance against the onslaught!

His eyes looked to the smashed machines standing outside the great mosque. Inside those shattered shells were the heroes who'd protected them. They had fought hard and now we're injured. Slowly, the old man began to walk. Soon, that walk turned into a run. For a moment he felt the years lift from his body as he ran towards the burning wrecks of what had been their defenders.

Behind him the faithful formed behind him, sensing his holy task. As the brave Azami had protected them, now they would protect the Azami by preserving their lives long enough for help to arrive. Without pause he headed to the machine of the great champion which had fallen moments after the jets had arrived. Not stopping, he ran to the chest and began to climb, his youth returned to him for just this moment, just this task, by Allah's infinite glory.

In moments he'd reached the cockpit and began looking desperately for some hatch, some way to extract the honored hero from within so his life may be saved, but found nothing. Struggling, he called to the sky, to Allah himself. Oh, merciful god! He prayed silently, if one more man was to die today, let it be him and not the great hero before him! He began to run his hand over the seam and his heart all but jumped from his chest when he felt a latch.

Grabbing it, he strained, but it would not open. Gritting his teeth the old man pushed his cane into the gap and used all his might to open it. By God's mercy he was rewarded with a click, and with a mighty shove he pulled the hatch open and peered inside.

It was hot beyond the depths of hell in the cockpit, even enough to

make a man of the desert himself reel back in shock. Oh, how mighty man he must be to fight in such conditions!

Ignoring his own discomfort, the old man crawled inside, and for the first time he saw the face of the great Aladdin Al Azim. He was half naked and covered with sweat, wearing a vast contraption on his head, and his vest was stained with blood.

Frowning, he looked inside for some way to release the hero so he might be removed and cared for. Drawing his knife he decided that time was of the essence and began to cut through his straps and the tubes connecting the vest to the cockpit. To his shock a wash of freezing blood tainted water gushed from the tube. Not seeing a way to remove the helmet he simply pulled the wires connecting it from the helmet.

As he began to pull him out he felt a hand on his shoulder. Behind him was standing a young woman whose black eyes shown with concern from under her scarf, and two adolescent boys whose faces bore the most steadfast determination.

"Let us help you," she said in a honey sweet voice.

He simply nodded and allowed the woman and two youths to help him bare the hero to safety.

As soon as they were clear of the 'Mech more people flocked to them and he allowed himself to relax as the champion was bore to safety and medical care. Suddenly his eyes went wide and he gasped for breath. He fell to his knees as he felt an agony in his chest that defied words. Tears of joy ran from his eyes as he realized what was happening. Allah had hear his prayer and had accepted. His life for that of a hero, a fair and honorable trade.

He dared not cry out, to bring attention to himself as he did not desire to insult merciful God. He had made his exchange and he would not attempt to turn away from it. His time had come. An old man dies, a hero lives. Allah was truly merciful!

Slowly he fell to the earth, and for a moment everything faded to black, and then there was light. He swore he could hear his departed bride calling to him from beyond. Into the light he went and as the last wisps of life faded from his elderly body, he smiled. He could see it.

He could see Paradise.

ORF Studio

Vienna / Austria

Earth

ORF1 ZIB20 20:00 local time

17 November 2005/3020

"Good Evening my name is Gerald Gross and I welcome you to *"Zeit im Bild"*.

Today's top topic is the pirate assault on Earth and especially the attack on Austria. Live from the attacked area Susane Specht. Susane where are you currently?"

"I am currently in *"Krems an der Donau"* where the devastation the pirate forces brought with their attack is easy to see.

As you can see behind me, parts of the port are still burning after the NATO retaliation against the attackers. Local fire-fighters have now been trying to contain and extinguish the fires for over 24 hours."

"What do we know about the civilian casualties?"

"When it became clear where the pirate ship would land the government tried to evacuate the area immediately but sadly not everyone made it out in time. When the pirate forces entered the city and took parts of it as hostage they demonstrated their willingness to kill by destroying several buildings. After the government couldn't meet their demand for offworld passage and ransom they started to destroy buildings systematically."

"This was when NATO decided to attack even though the pirates were in a city right?"

"That's right Gerald. After that our Government agreed to the NATO attack. Fortunately the attack was a success but the destruction was already caused. Civilian casualties are expected to be around one hundred to one hundred and fifty people. Exact numbers are still unknown and rescue operations are still going on."

"What about the military casualties?"

"When the pirates war machines attacked the city the Bundesheer was not able to stop them. Apparently the weapons deployed by our forces were not strong enough to damage the pirates machines. Their weapons on the other hand proved to be extremely lethal. Eighty Six soldiers have been confirmed dead, forty two wounded."

"What is the reaction of the military to this?"

"Well Gerald, the soldiers I had the opportunity to talk to are extremely displeased. The general opinion is that they simply aren't equipped to fight such a force.

A soldier who seemingly has some knowledge about Battletech and these "*Mechs*" the pirates employed told me that throwing stones would have about the same effect. The military leadership is currently blaming the government for not being allowed to use heavy equipment near the city. The government has yet to answer to these accusations."

"What about the attempted assault on the pirates space ship?"

"Not much is known about that. All I can tell you is that the Jagtkommando tried to capture the ship but ran into pirate infantry forces still in the ship. What we know is that the ship surrendered after the forces in the city were defeated."

"Is there any word about what will happen to the captured pirates or the captured equipment?"

"NATO and our government are pretty tight lipped about that. But we know that the captured ship has already been handed over to NATO. The future of the pirates is currently unclear. It still has to be seen if they will face trial as prisoners of war, terrorist or just multiple cases of murder."

"Thank you Susane. Let's hope that the casualties numbers don't climb higher.

Now with me in the studio is a local Battletech expert"

Alexander Mayer left the Soldatenheim, he had already heard enough Battletech experts on TV. Being a Battletech enthusiast himself he could only take so many analyses of the current political situation in the Inner Sphere before becoming bored. After all, there were more interesting things to watch.

Pictures and Movies of the attack were easily available to anyone with a TV or an internet connection. The assaults on Mecca and Washington being on the forefront of international newscast.

Naturally, the Austrian Channels were mainly concerned with the attack on Krems. By far not as much political dynamite as the attack on the two important cities, but a wake up call to many.

It seems the population realised that Battletech factions didn't care about neutrality or how peaceful you were. Sadly that was still a hard concept to swallow for many. Protestors were complaining about the treatment of the prisoners and the lack of information about them.

"The fires still weren't put out and the people start complaining", thought Alexander as he reached his bunk. He was thankful that at least in his country the politicians were blamed and not the military. Considering that he cursed the entire government on live TV he should be happy that they had more important things to do.

What had they expected him to say? Being thrown into a bunch of reporters after seeing his friends and squat mates die, after being chased throw the city by angry Battlemechs just because you blew up the canalization under a crossroad and threw two houses on the fallen Locust scout.

"Not my best idea".

He leaned back unto the bed.

"No, definitely not one of my best ideas."

The air strike of the NATO forces had saved the life of every single member of his squad. People he was responsible for. Had the political bullshitting and the attempted negotiation with the pirates gone on for much longer he would have been another person for the brigade to mourn.

Being the nearest military force to the projected landing zone the 3rd Panzergrenadierbrigade had mobilized. Thankfully the evacuation of

the civilians ran more smoothly than the mobilization of the brigade. After the pirates landed and their target was clear the order was given to prevent the enemies entry into the city.

The Mechs didn't even bother fighting them. They simply shrugged off whatever firepower was thrown their way and broke through the line. Taking the city as a hostage while the brigade had to watch because the use of heavy weapons was not allowed near or in a city. The result was a standoff, the military threatened the dropship while the pirates stomped around the city. Thankfully even the politicians of Austria accepted that negotiation with the pirates would not lead to anything and allowed NATO forces to intervene. And all it took to reach this decision was for large parts of the city to start burning. The ammo explosion of the Griffin in the harbour completed the devastation.

Being the first to respond, his brigade took most of the casualties. Alexander's roommate was one of them. Currently in the hospital with a broken arm and a broken leg. He was lucky, unarmored infantry didn't have a high life expectancy when fighting a mech. Alexander spent most of day visiting his friend. With most of brigade being off-duty and people more important than him trying to figure out what happened and why, he hadn't much to do.

He was tired and wanted to be somewhat fit for tomorrow. He turned off the light and tried to sleep. Tomorrow he expected to reap the consequences of his actions.

Kaserne Mautern / Lower Austria

Earth

06:00 local time

18 November 2005/3020

When the "Tagwache" call echoed through the building Alexander was already on his way to breakfast. With the base fully staffed the canteen was never really empty. At breakfast it seemed like a bee hive. On his way to the canteen he had already seen activity at the hangar which housed the captured Locust. The guys from Steyr and

General Dynamics were apparently early risers. Or, what he found more likely, they never went to sleep. He could understand them, it's not everyday that you can play around with genuine science fiction technologies.

After greeting a few friends while getting his usual breakfast, he sat down and opened today's newspaper. The local part was once again full with the coalition parties trying to blame each other and the opposition screaming bloody murder. Business as usual.

The international section was far more interesting. The picture of an Union class dropship sitting in front of the Eiffeltower was simply priceless. The new self declared warlord of Congo was hiding in his Battlemech cause the trigger-happy locals were not too happy with him. And in the USA a soldier though he was a Mech-jockey and took on the invaders on his own. In true American "head through the wall" mentality he actually won, while trashing his ride. There was also a photograph of a female mechwarrior who helped defending Washington. Natalie something, the so called "Black Widow of Washington".

"If all Space Babes look like her I need to get myself a spaceship." Starring at the photo of an attractive woman dressed only in a cooling vest, a sweat soaked T-shirt, shorts and boots made him wish they hadn't immediately handed over their captured pirates. Sighing, the now completely awakened man turned the page.

Apparently Muslims all over the world were screaming for blood. And for once it was not against "the West". Even if some nut jobs tried the usual blame the USA thing. Luckily they were ignored. There was some talking about the Mecca on the other Earth being destroyed, which only helped to fuel the fires.

Even the economy part was full of invasion related news. The oil price and the stocks of all major car and energy companies took a dump when it became clear that Earth forces captured quite a few working fusion engines. As the people realized that Earth didn't understand these engines and couldn't build them at the moment the stocks began to rise again. Probable helped along by the announcement of electric cars powered with Battletech batteries by every big name in the business.

The energy suppliers relaxed once they recognized that the Battletech fusion engines produced a lot of heat as an unwanted side effect. Which could be used to heat water into steam to turn a turbine. Just

exchange whatever you use to generate heat with a fusion engine and you have two power sources in one plant.

It seemed that applying fusion to a companies name was enough to get the stocks sky high. To Alexander it sounded like the DOT-COM fiasco of 2000. Naturally the stocks of all companies producing war material were also rising.

Finishing his breakfast and putting his tray away, Alexander walked back to the barracks. Just as he was crossing the parade ground he was interrupted.

A young Gefreiter was trying to catch his attention and saluted. Alexander returned the greeting and asked what the young man wanted.

"Herr Wachmeister, Hauptmann Moser wants you to report to him at 9:00. He will be in his office in the Stabskompanie."

He knew that would happen. Simply asking the man in front of him, "If this was all?", his mind was already trying to figure out what would await him. On the positive answer he dismissed the young man and went to his room.

Kaserne Mautern / Lower Austria

Earth

Stabskompanie 08:57 local time

18 November 2005/3020

The Stabskompanie was busy. It was after all responsible for running this base and keeping the brigade supplied. And the offices in this building housed most of the higher-ranking personnel. At point 9:00 he entered the office of Hauptmann Joachim Moser. Alexander stood at attention, saluted and waited to be acknowledged.

"At ease Wachmeister. Take a seat, we have much to discuss."

A little surprised by the relaxed tone Alexander took a chair and waited for the Hauptmann to continue. Time to see which consequences insulting the collective political leadership brought.

"It seems that all the confusion and paperwork the attack carried with it worked to your advantage. It took until now for a response to your, lets call it lapse in judgment, to form. I'll be frank with you Alexander when I say that I agree with what you said. Most people on this base will agree, just not on live TV."

Here a small smile threatened to cross the Hauptmanns face.

"You have been a good soldier and your plan to stop one of the attacking mechs was a good idea but we both know that insulting the government while in uniform has consequences. Luckily for you the general population also agrees with you. Just today the high command has been informed that the Bundespräsident will disband the federal government because of their inability to deal with the given situation and a new election will be held. This has the side effect that any public attempt to reprimand you would be political suicide."

"What does that mean for me Sir?", the now completely confused Wachmeister asked.

"You are somewhat famous and a political time bomb. The people will remember what you did. In order to strengthen our international relations it was decided to make you someone else's problem. Congratulations Wachmeister Mayer! You have been volunteered to join GDI."

Having said his piece the Hauptmann couldn't hold back the grin any longer when he saw dumbfound expression on the younger mans face.

Sea Floor
Pacific Ocean
Earth
20 November 2005

It was pitch dark outside, with the only light being generated by generated by the *Alvin DSV*. The tiny submarine's lamps illuminated a massive humanoid form lying of a Battlemech on the sea floor. The mech was all... wrinkly would be the best term, crushed by the high pressure depths. But it looked reasonably intact, so *Alvin* used its mechanical arms to attach one of many improvised beacons that it was carrying to the drowned machine.

"Okay," said *Alvin's* pilot, one Petty Officer Jeremy Davids. "Looks like we're done here, continuing search pattern."

"I think we've seen all that we're gonna see," one of the passenger scientists said.

"Oh, come on, Theo," said the other passenger said. "We've found a lot of stuff so far. Have a little optimism."

Alvin's mission today was to locate anything worth salvaging from the Overlord Dropship that had crashed into the ocean less than a week ago. So far, the three man team in *Alvin* had located some plating and structural members and not much else other than a few wrecks that looked like they dated to World War II or even earlier. The Battlemech had been the highlight of the operation so far.

"You come on, Simon," Theo replied. "The Overlord came down over the Laurentian Abyss. It's probably down there where we can't reach it. Everything we've found so far looks like debris that fell off as it was coming down."

"Nah, can't be. The debris is too tightly spaced," Simon disagreed. "I think what happened is that ocean currents pushed everything off to this side of the Abyss. That would fit the dispersion pattern that we're seeing."

"Oh please," Theo snorted. "Half a dozen fragments and a mech in a hundred square miles isn't exactly 'tightly spaced', or even a meaningful sample size."

The two scientists continued to bicker like an old married couple. Davids had long since learned to tune them out, although some bits caught his interest.

"Have you ever considered that we're running around in one of the early progenitors of the Battlemech?" Simon mused.

"Oh, have you been smoking that junk again, Simon?" Theo asked. "What kind of poppycock are you going on about now?"

"No. no, seriously," Simon said. "Look, *Alvin* is obviously a fore-runner of the Industrial-mechs that the Battlemechs were based on. I mean, look." He played with one of his controls and the sub rocked slightly. "Arms!"

"Hey! No using the arms while we're transiting!" Davids interjected.

"Sorry, Dave," Simon said to him. "But the point, Theo, is that if we attached a pair of legs to *Alvin*, we could have our very own functional mech!"

"What good would legs do on a *submarine*?" Theo asked skeptically.

"That's not the point..."

"Okay, we're approaching the edge of the Abyss," Davids interrupted. "Turning to heading... uh, I got something big on my sonar sticking out of the seafloor. Can you guys confirm?"

"Um, yeah, I'm seeing it too," Simon said, all business now. "Might be a natural rock formation."

"Magnetometer's going crazy," Theo reported. "And I think the surrounding water's warmed up slightly."

"Is it the Overlord?" Davids asked as he steered *Alvin* toward the

thing.

"It's too small," Simon said, disappointed.

"But we did find pieces of it," Theo said. "I think this might be a bigger fragment. These damned magnetometer readings aren't making sense. Simon, what do you make of them?"

"Lemme see..."

"Oh, yeah, definitely part of the Overlord," Davids said as *Alvin's* lights played over twisted structural members and other less identifiable bits that reached for the surface. Whatever it was, it was simply too big for the *Alvin's* paltry lights to illuminate everything. But one thing that was clear was this thing was teetering right on the cliff edge above the Laurentian Abyss.

"Holy mother of God..."

"What? What is it?" Davids asked, concerned. "Is it going to blow up?"

"Maybe, I don't know," Simon replied. "But I think we're looking at the Overlord's fusion reactor... and I think it's still running."

**NBC Studios
New York City
New York
Earth
25 November 2005**

"Hello, I'm Anne Curie, and with me today is Economics Professor Ian Jakbarti of Princeton University. Hello, Professor, thanks for being here."

"Of course, Anne. I'm happy to be of service."

"Now, Professor, word has it that the GDI has managed to capture a substantial amount of 'Dropships' and 'Jumpships' during what people now are calling the Pirate War. What effect will that have on the economy?"

"Better to ask, what effect won't it have on the economy, Anne? For a start, we now have cheap lift capacity into space. In addition to being able to put missile platforms into space all in one go as opposed to a few at a time, I've been hearing about all sorts of pie in the sky plans to use those Dropships to build a true space infrastructure; hell, some of them might even work! And then there are all the research scientists who want a crack at studying their engines so we can learn to build more such vessels."

"What about the Jumpships, Professor? There's been a great deal of talk opening up trade with the Inner Sphere and just buying whatever advanced tech we want to reverse engineer."

"Ah, well it's not quite that simple, Anne. For a start, my understanding is that whatever Jumpships we have is under GDI control and that they're understandably more concerned with our planet's security than going into the interstellar shipping business."

"Of course. But what if the GDI permits trade? What ought we to buy?"

"Well therein lies the question, doesn't it? My understanding is that

the Inner Sphere economy is in a shambles and has been for nearly three hundred years. We simply just can't drop in on a planet and buy whatever we like wholesale be it space fighters or mechs or laser weapons or even just more ships because there isn't any to buy."

"Why not?"

"Because the Inner Sphere's ability to produce the very high tech items that we want barely meets their own needs. In fact, it's arguable that their production doesn't meet their needs at all and that they make up the difference by constantly salvaging fallen machines and occasionally finding one of those caches of equipment that the Star League littered the Inner Sphere with. Finding anything for sale will be difficult, finding it in mass quantities we want even more difficult. And to top it all off, there's the money issue."

"Money issue? Isn't the exchange rate something like one of their 'C-Bills' for every three U.S. dollars or something?"

"Oh, I've seen lots of theoretical estimates about what the exchange rates are going to be, Anne, but that's all they are: theoretical. There's no trade between Earth and the Inner Sphere at present, or even regular contact. Thus, there's no exchange, and Inner Sphere currency is worthless on Earth. By the same token, any currency on from our planet is equally worthless over there unless we can find someone who collects antique money."

"But... how? How is that possible, Professor? Money is money."

"Heh. That's a common misconception. Money, Anne, is valuable only as long people treat it as valuable. Paper bills, whether they're Dollars or C-Bills, have no intrinsic value in and of themselves. Rather, they represent buying power, the goods and services owed to you the individual by society as measured by money. So dollars can buy goods and services on Earth, and C-Bills can do the same in the Inner Sphere. But as long as there is no trade between the two of us, then our monies cannot be exchanged with each other."

"So how do we trade with the Inner Sphere if our money is no good over there?"

"Oh, that's easy, Anne. You said it yourself: trade. We load up a ship with goods, sell it over in the Sphere in exchange for C-Bills, buy whatever we can afford that's available, and bring it back here and do whatever the GDI wants us to do with the stuff. Load up more goods and repeat the cycle. Simple!"

"But what about the security aspects? I understand that the things that we make that will sell well in the Inner Sphere will attract all sorts of armed robbers in thirty foot tall mechs. Last week was proof of that."

"Not my field, Anne. I'm just an economist after all."

Andrews AFB
November 15th 3020/2005
22:30 PM

Major Andreas Staedele was standing on the tarmac of the air base, about a hundred meters from the two large hangars his unit had been housed in provisionally, holding a cup of hot tea and watching the stars.

'Somewhere up there Marc, Hanna, 1st platoon, the ships crew and those "Delta Force" soldiers should be docking with that jumper right about now. I just hope Marc managed to teach them *gyrojet-rifles 101* on the way up. Can't have them damage our equipment or get injured needlessly,' he thought.

He already did have a near-aneurism when he told the locals that it would be a cold day in hell when he'd let them pack a nuclear weapon into *his* ship. He didn't want to have anything to do with the things. Luckily, they had compromised after he had explained that the *Distant Home* wouldn't need a god-damned nuke if they really wanted to shoot up a jumpship. These things were virtually unarmed and easy targets, after all.

Taking a look around, he watched the air base bustling with activity, planes starting and landing, people scurrying around doing their jobs. They were all avoiding the part of the installation that had been reserved for his mercenary unit. They even were under guard by the base's security detail, mostly to hold the crowd of reporters at bay that was lurking right behind the outer fence. And to keep his men under close scrutiny, he was sure. Not that he resented that, he was originally planning to invade this rock after all.

Looking back at the hangars, he was able to catch a glimpse through the open door of one, seeing his Warhammer and the Cav's techs as they were furiously working to repair the damage to his machines as fast as possible. At the door of the other hangar, housing the personnel and dependents for now, a few infantrymen of 3rd platoon were gathered up and had a chat.

Staedele slipped further into his own thoughts and began to let the day pass in his memories again. The nuclear attack. His decision to not risk his people against a nuclear power. The new contract. The battle and it's aftermath.

Johnsons two platoons and the National Guard had caught a company or so of motorized Port Krin PBI on the intersection of Independence and Pennsylvania Avenue. The poor guys only knew that they were under attack when 1st platoon salvo-fired the LAWs and pretty much shredded their convoy. The rest of the resistance was put down withhin minutes after that, the still shocked militia troops being cut apart in a murderous crossfire with only a scant few survivors surrendering. Some had fired back, even with SRM, though, and the local surgeons were still operating Pvt Ling, hoping to prevent his arm from being crippled permanently. Two other members of his infantry force were wounded, too, and one of the guardsmen had been killed outright when an SRM had hit directly below the window he was firing from. Not to mention the smaller injuries quite a few of the defenders had taken.

He and Miller, on the other hand, were doing fine. He hadn't suffered anything pain killer couldn't solve and Miller's concussion was light enough for her to be combat effective again in a day.

In the aftermath, Staedele had summarised the status of the pirate Mechs to Gen. Norwell. The Rifleman had suffered a complete reactor failure and repairing that would take ripping out the entire reactor for sure. It also had lost one of the autocannons and damaged the shoulder activator when falling over. The Marauder Ned had taken apart was a wreck. Staedele had taken a single look and immediately recognised a fatal structural collapse. Taking that thing apart and building a new Mech would be easier than repairing it. The Crusader, on the other hand, simple required a new head with a cockpit, sensor systems and the like. Otherwise it was fine, save for the armor damage all machines in that fight had suffered. In other words, prime salvage material. The Archer on the other hand... the biggest parts they found of that one were the feet and lower legs. The rest of the Mech had been scattered over half the inner city, some chunks even landing on the lawn directly in front of the White House.

"The White House", he murmured, traces of shock and disbelief still visible on his face. When he had come back to Andrews, his wife and daughter had been waiting to tell him those particular news. Esther had been using the hand-held camera he had given her as a present on her 9th birthday. He knew that the record of his face when they told him would be something she'd use to tease him for years. And telling it the other people in the unit and the dependents had caused some major unrest.

He still could barely believe it. 21st century earth being flung through time and space into the 31st century and placed hundreds of lightyears away from its original position? It was as if he was in some kind of bad novel! And yet, he could see the evidence with his own eyes, touch it with his own hands. One of the techs, a muslim, had been crying out of joy when he realized that the holy city of his religion was still standing. Or again standing. Or whatever... Even thinking about it caused Staedele to get headaches.

'Well, at least I'm not alone with that', he thought. The locals were just as confused as far as he could tell. With the whole invasion and all, he was told, it would likely take another day before either that President Ryan or his secretary of defense, one Tony Bretano, would be able to meet the Buron Cavalry and sort out the contract they had been offered. Till then, they were under strict isolation, especially from the ever growing mob of local media waiting outside the base. 'At least in regard to the contract negotiations, I might have a slight advantage', Staedele mused. 'My people did save their capital from a lot of grief, after all.'

"*Sigh* This is going to be one hell of a week, isn't it?" he asked nobody particular. Then he started walking towards the door of the small office inside the hangar housing the dependents. It had been converted into a temporary office for him and a briefing room for the unit. If he remembered right, he had taken his personal effects from the *Distant Home* and placed them in there. Including the whiskey.

"I need a drink."

Waters off LA

With a grunt Emily Hastings managed to untangle herself from the parachute that had gotten her down and began to paddle a way, mindful of the risk of tangling in the lines and drowning despite the emergency vest inflating around her neck. Her ears were still ringing from the blast of her fighter which had blown her helmet off, and then the rough landing in the ocean. She could see a very large very military looking ship in the distance bearing down on her position, almost certainly the one that shot her down. A small inflatable launch from that ship was closing on her position fast.

"Keep you hands where we can see them" said one of the men with a microphone. Several had rifles pointed at her. She complied keeping her arms away from her body. She had no intention dying after trying to survive all those missiles.

As the boat pulled along side two men reached down to grab her out stretched hand. She was unceremoniously hauled aboard. As she fell on the deck she expected to be restrained immediately and likely knocked out with rifle butt. While the other kept a careful watch with their weapons they made no overt hostile move. They were rough but careful and they propped her against the side of the boat to brace her as the boat accelerated back toward the ship. She was shivering quite a bit from the shock from the temperature controlled dropship then the sweltering to the cold Pacific water. Somebody threw a blanket around her and almost immediately a man with a white armband with the universally recognized Red Cross on his arm knelt beside her and began to check her over and ask her questions.

"Can you understand what I'm saying?" "Can you feel all your extremities?" "Are you hurt anywhere?"

Still a little dazed from the blast she managed wordless answers. Nodding and shaking to the barrage of question that focused on her wellbeing she answered as best she could. "OK, you look alright just a little shock. We'll have the doc look you over when we get back the Hill." The medic concluded.

As they pull along side the ship she could see more people on the deck and a rope ladder had been deployed. Upon climbing on deck a short, chubby, blond woman in a white doctor's coat began checking her over while questioning the medic who had treated her. The doctor introduced her self as Doctor Amy Steiner. She was quite surprised no one had made any threat or demands yet. Deciding to go with her gut she cooperated with the instructions.

Half an hour later she was sitting in a bed in the sick bay, with a change of proper clothing, the clothing seemed to be like what the crew was wearing but with no rank or badges of any kind. They had taken away the flight suit and given her a hospital gown to wear while they examined her, which was some how exactly as uncomfortable and awkward as the ones in the Inner Sphere.

When the examination began it was quite an eye opener for her. She had expected something much more intrusive and rough, and in the brig not in the regular sick bay. The methods were interesting to say the least. When they found out she had a head injury on the back of her head, which she didn't even notice, the doctor immediately ordered a scan for her head. She had assumed scan referred to some kind of X-ray, which they did do, but after the X-ray they wheeled out some kind of... imager was the best word she could use. They called it an MRI. When it went to work she could only gape as an impossibly clear image of her head began to take shape, bone, muscle, brain and all. She knew soft tissue was hard, almost impossible, for and X-rays and this was far clearer and faster than X-rays. Technology like this wasn't even possible in the capitals of the Great Houses. She knew because she had been in Tharkad's top hospital when her mother had gotten cancer. When they found out the family had decided to move into the heart of the Lyran Commonwealth to seek treatment, made easier when your home was a jumpship and an attached Leopard. 'If this is what they have on a ship what must they have in a full hospital' she though amazed.

It was then that a tall redheaded man entered she didn't recognize the insignias but everyone in sickbay snapped to attention and saluted so she could assume he was probably the captain or someone close to that level.

He made a beeline for the doctor. She could tell they were talking about her by the occasional glances sending her way. They abruptly finished then the officer headed her way

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Bridge of Port Royal

"Sir the pilot is on board. She's being taken to sickbay now. The doctor said she was suffering from early signs of hypothermia" said a crewman. Even off LA the water was quite cold in winter.

"Keep me updated."

a short time later the bridge received a call from sickbay.

"Sir Doctor Steiner says that the pilot is fine but she doesn't want them taking her to the brig. She wants to keep her there, with a guard of course."

"You have the bridge commander I want to talk to that pilot"

As he reached the bridge he noticed the CMO waving him over
"Anything I should know doctor?"

"She's fine over all a few scrape and bruises from the ejection and landing. Minor head injury I check there no internal damage just a contusion. We got her out of the water before hypothermia set so the worst she'll get is a minor cold." She filled him in

"One more thing captain. Part of the reason I prevented them from taking her to the brig she is very young and nervous"

"I can see that" he glanced over at the person in question sitting on the examination bed "she can't be older than my daughter and she's just out of college, Impressive flying for someone so young. But is that enough to keep her here?"

"Think younger. Her wisdom teeth just barely came in she cant be more than 20. The acne and pimples says she's probably around

16-18."

"Impossible it takes years of training to fly like she did, you just cant react that fast and handle those kinds of Gs right away."

"That's what my examination shows captain. I wasn't comfortable sending a child like that to the brig right away. I wanted to talk to you first."

"She is an enemy combatant Emily. She took down 3 of our best planes. I'll talk to her now and then I'll make the call." He headed over to the bed.

"Miss Hastings is that right?"

"Yes sir."

"That was some good flying up there. I used to fly the same type of fighter that took your bird down, what you did wasn't easy"

"Thanks" her face lit up which highlighted to Reed how young she was. "I lost though."

"But you lasted longer than you had any right to. You also shot down three of our planes one of the pilots died in his plane." From the way her face fell and the queasy look he could tell she was really not used to the thought of killing your opponent

"I had to he was shooting at me. Didn't want to, didnt want to be here at all. Nobody in the group did."

"Why are you here?"

"We didn't have a choice. Needed the money to keep the ships and mechs going."

"And who is 'we'"

"Fire Brand mercenary group one of the most flexible units for our size. Or they were before I joined up they haven't been the same since they took those contract with the Dracs" she said 'Dracs' like a curse

word, he would have to take note of that and ask later. "I fly the drop ships and did fighter recon and cover for them. Or I did until you shot down the fighter."

"I have to ask how does a child like you end up running with a bunch of mercenaries and be a good enough pilot to make it worth their while?"

"I'm not a child." she stood up and came level to his eyes. No mean feat considering he was 6'2"

Captain Reed was undaunted "My doctors says otherwise. By the state of your development you cant be more then 16-17. You're tall and that might have helped you pass but not by my doctor."

"Side effect of spending half my growing years in zero G. I was part of a jumpship merchant family." she stressed the was.

"What happened?"

"The Draconis Combine." she sneered. "Some commander needed more jumpships for some operation wanted our to go along. We said 'no we had another run to make.' He searched our ships planted some crap about us smuggling. Didn't help that we had hidden compartments, most independent ships did. They took the ship away killed by dad when he tried to resist, arrested my uncle. He bribed them with our last savings so I got away."

"Ended up on the same world with a Brands, they needed a pilot and I came cheap. Been with them for the last few contracts, they've been hemorrhaging funds since they lost half their mechs working for the Dracs. By now there's Not much left, had to make the raid to so we can afford to keep what we have running. Not like those greedy pirates in that Union. We much prefer to work for honest wage"

That got his attention, he had heard about what the Burron Cav had offered "so your group works for the highest bidder?"

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Firebrand

It had taken most of the day to get all the mechs out. The doors on the Port side was jammed shut so a 1/3 of his mech force was stuck in the hold until the techs could cut it loose it. They only had 6 mechs and he felt naked when his 2 heaviest were out of the fight.

Now Brand thumbed his mike addressing his 6 mechs and the pirates' 9. "Alright people, here's the situation. And listened carefully Hastings went down to get us this intel." He didn't want to say died. The kid was talented and resourceful, and she was just a kid no matter what she said, and if there was a chance she could have survived she would find it. "

He continued "there is a large armor force bearing down on up with at least sixty plus tanks and a large artillery complement. If they get in range they're going to shell our drop ships to slag. So we have to engage them as far out as possible. The Fire Brands will be organized into one over strength lance, call sigh Fist. Our six heavies and assault will be the primary striking force.

"Alpha and Beta lance" he referred to the pirates' lance by their own unimaginative names. "You will be the scouts and skirmishers. Make sure they don't out flank us. And for God's sake keeps those damn infantry off us. Any questions?"

"What's to keep those artillery from pounding us?" one of the pirates asked.

"We'll be in a middle of the city they wouldn't dare fire on us even if they somehow miraculously able to hit us. Anything else? Alright let move out."

They formed up now on the eastern end of the island. The bridges to the island were secure and covered by the drop ships so they felt comfortable leaving the pirate's 3 vehicles to defend the island. Brand could see a hive of activity as the pirates crawled allover the containers looking for the best loot. There wasn't any worker around, they had all ran when they Hammer touched down, so the pirates had the run of the place. He told his own crew to stay put in the

dropships. He didn't want to get into a turf war with the pirates over who get what. If his own people found anything good the pirates would try to claim it as theirs being the firsts ones down. Best to let them fill up their own hold and then go through themselves. Port this big there was bound to be enough to fill up all 3 dropships to the brim with prime goods.

Brand brought up the display for all the mechs under his command and signed at the weight gap. His mechs were all heavies and one assault. The heaviest was his Zeus, followed by the Thunderbolt, Orion, Ostol, Ostroc, and Dragon. Their mediums and lights had been lost 2 contracts ago along with their third leopard. While their main battle line survived, they were all in a sad state of disrepair with most having a weapon or 2 missing, like his Zeus's LRM. But they survived and that meant they could be repaired, eventually.

The pirates on the other hand had a mix of lights and mediums with an antique 55 ton Gladiator(not clan Gladiator, SL era DC model) acting as their commander's ride. The rest were a mix of, three Cicadas, one Locust, a Clint, a pair of Commandos, a Spider, and the heaviest being the Gladiator.

They crossed the bridge and moved into the city beyond heading East. Brand suppressed a sign as the pirates in their lighter mechs surged ahead into the city beyond into a cluster of tall buildings. 'So much for cooperation' he thought.

They soon encountered the first of the local militia only half a mile from the island; it was a small ubiquitous military looking ground car common across the Sphere. What was a surprise was that it mounted some kind of very accurate guided SRM. In between the strings of curses from the pirate Cicada he pieced together that the missile barely missed his cockpit. As it is it only took some armor off his right torso. The small car was promptly melted to slag by the Cicada's lasers.

After that they only saw intermittent contacts until they begun to approach the end of the cluster of skyscrapers, mostly brief glimpses that would disappear behind building as soon as they saw it. Or the pirates did anyway. The pirate's pell-mell rush into the city meant his

group of Heavies were a significant distance behind and were just approaching the cluster of tall buildings that the pirates had already passed though.

Then there was a sudden rash of radio traffic from the pirates as they engaged the local militia.

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National Guard Forward command post.

General Martin starred at the various screens depicting his own force's disposition and the expected enemy forces. Drone recon could determine that the enemy forces had separated into 2 distinct forces, a group of 6 larger slower 'mechs' falling behind a group of faster mechs that had dashed ahead. It was consistent with what the Navy had reported, though he still had his doubts about the source of that intel, and their own signal intercepts. But even if they didn't manage to crack their encryption he could tell from force movement that they were 2 forces that had little or no experience working together. As it is he could hear what the lighter group were saying all over the waves. The attempts at encryption were pitiful and were easily cracked by NSA assets and relayed to his command. The rearward force was practicing much tighter encryption and he still didn't know what they were saying.

"Get me on the line with the commanders of Delta and Bravo company" he said naming the 2 companies in the direct path of the advancing mechs.

"This is Captain Franks sir."

"This is Captain White sir."

"Captains I'll be frank with you. I need you to stay there and hold the line at all cost. The civilians haven't finished evacuating yet and if those mechs advance further they'll have the evacuation busses right under their guns. Now the Marine flyboys from Miramar are in the air but they can't get a shot through those tall buildings if we let them clear the buildings they'll get a shot at the buses so I need you

there to hold the line there for at least 30 minutes for the last bus to be away. Then you can fall back and let the Jarheads pound them."

"Sir, can we expect any additional reinforcements?" Said Franks. "We only have 7 tanks between our 2 companies, sir."

"There's a column of marine tanks with infantry and artillery support on the way up from San Diego but apparently not even an Abrams will get through LA traffic. ETA is at best 40-50 minutes. There's a LDH with 5 tanks and various armor on the way and ready to conduct and amphibious landing but that is an hour away and is being held up as a backup and support for a spec-ops mission. Elements of the First Armored, about a battalion's worth, are also on the way, again held up by the choke of traffic of people fleeing and heading to the engagement zone ETA 70-80 minutes. You're on your own for now gentlemen. I know what I'm asking of you and I have to do it, we cannot leave the civilian to the mercies of those damn pirates."

"Understood sir, we hold"

"We hold" echoed White.

"Very good gentlemen you do your country proud"

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Bravo Company

Bravo Company's infantry was spread out over a wide area among the building in LA. The Infantry was broken into small group and given every single Javelins they had at the depot. Those that weren't carrying Javelins were issued AT4s and even some Carl Gustavs. Even then only about 2/3 of the troops had some kind of anti tank weapon. The same could be said for Delta Company on Bravo's right flank.

There were another 4 companies in the area but they had dug in at the other 2 bridges going off the island to act as blocking forces incase they decided to use those routes. They were still covering evac points of their own and couldn't leave in case the pirates sent out their armor or infantry.

Captain Timothy White Began to give his instructions. "Order all the men to get in among the alley between houses and building along this zone." He indicated an area in the mechs' path. "Don't enter the houses though they'll go up like tinder under those lasers and they'll be trapped." He knew Capt. Franks would be issuing similar instructions to his own troops.

"The once the infantry disengage our 3 tanks are to coordinate with Delta's 4 and hit the pirates at once in a pincer. Don't go strait down the street at a mech it's a maze here use it, hide behind the house if they get a bead on your tanks. Let the others get a shot in, when they turn away then come hit them again. The Bradleys and TOW armed Humvees will be our last line of defense. Wear them down at long range with hit and run tactics. Do not under any circumstance try to stand and engage they cannot stand against that fire power, use their lower profile and the intersections to their advantage.

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1st Platoon

"Are the men in position?" asked Lt. Homer.

"Yes sir. When the mech crosses that intersection 3 Javelins and 2 AT4s will hit him from the south, and 4 AT4 and 1 Javelin will hit him from the North. We also have 3 AT4s to hit it in the back."
Answered Sgt Top.

"Corporal what can you tell me about the mech?"

Corporal Willis was the de facto expert on all matters mech related. He had been borrowed from 3rd platoon since by some quirk of assignment 3rd had five people who knew about Battletech while 4th had one and 1st and 2nd had none.

"Well sir I think that's a Spider?"

"You think?"

"I don't have the source books with me and it's not that common a mech. Sir. But the profile and size says it's a Spider."

"What can you tell me about it?"

"It's a 30 tonner. Good news, it's poorly armed even for its size, only 2 medium lasers, not very good against infantry..."

"And the bad news?" Homer could tell from the tone there was something else.

"Unless it's one of the 2 variants that would be common in this time period. The first variant mounts a flamer in place of a laser, dangerous for infantry at close range.
The other has a laser and 2 machine guns. Really deadly for infantry."

"Alright, have the team on its right hit it first, then the rear team, then the left team that should keep it turning in circles."

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As the Spider approached the intersection the men of 1st platoon got into their position, using the alleyways between houses to move

undetected.

"NOW!" upon the signal from spotters that had been placed on the high-rises out of view of the mech they launched their attacks.

The Southern team on the mech's right launched their missiles. The Spider was completely surprised it had been looking to its left when its right torso and arm suddenly erupted in a wave of explosions. None of it breached the armor but it did remove a good chunk of it. It turned right only to see a few shadows of movements as the soldiers who fired the missiles scurried in between the houses. Then its side was rocked again as its already weakened right side was hit again this time something got through. Though they couldn't see it some fragments had gotten through to the gyro. It wasn't many or large but it was enough to jam it. The mech was much more unstable now. Unfortunately for the rear team they did not get to enjoy their success, all 3 men were caught by the lasers of the Cicada who had been behind the Spider.

The Spider's punishment wasn't finished however as that moment the last team let loose into the Spider's back. Blowing off most of the armor there and escaping behind the houses.

The same scene played out among the other pirate mechs to varying degree of effectiveness. Those attacking the heavier mechs saw them barely flinch but the lighter mechs took some not insignificant damage, like the Wasp which lost a medium laser. The National Guardsmen who when out to attack also took a terrible toll, some mechs were quick enough on their feet or the soldier too slow and were caught by the mech's answering fire. Some soldiers who did get under cover still lost their lives as the mechs plastered the area with missiles and caught the soldiers in the blast. The flimsy wooded houses of LA, designed to resist earthquakes, afforded little protection.

Then as the mechs were busy hunting around every nook and cranny for infantries the tanks came into play.

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"Black lead to all Black units, the guys from Delta Company are in position, their call sign is Dog. On my mark move forward and engage the pirate mechs, remember don't get in a slugging match with them, hit and run. We just need to keep them busy and prevent them from advancing north into the evac zone." Lt Tam said to his under strength tank platoon, their 4th tank had its engine in pieces for maintenance and so were unable to join them.

"GO!"

It wasn't quite standard procedure but the gunner had a round in the chamber already and was holding one in his arm and another between his legs for quick loading as the tank charged around the corner straight at a pirate Commando.

The tank opened fire the moment it cleared the building it was hiding behind. BOOM, the first shot clipped the mech on its right arm, the loader quickly jammed the second round in, BOOM the second shot just missed the arm and the high explosive round slammed straight into the Commando's right side. BOOM, just as the third shot hit the mech straight in the center torso as it turned to engage the threat, the tank had already turned right on to another street cutting across a formerly beautifully maintained lawn. They had only travel a block toward the mech. As they speedup after the turn the house behind them exploded as laser and an wave of missiles from the angry mech blasted through to where they were only moments earlier.

Not every tank managed to escape unscathed like Lt Tam's.

A Locust on the northern flank was faced in the right direction and decided to intercept a tank that had attacked a Cicada. That led it to be given a lesson in cold hard physics. Seeing the mech's distinctive profile and knowing the weight of the disparity in his favor the commander obliged it by charging straight at it instead of turning like he was supposed to. The cold equation of 65 tons of metal charging at over 40 KPH at a 20 ton mech was inescapable.

The Abram impacted the mech and due to the leg geometry ran up the legs for a split second before it crumpled under the force of the tank. The legs were crushed beneath the tank but the massive

momentum of the tank kept it going. The barrel of the main cannon speared right into the locust's belly, its weakest point since mech designers did not expect the belly under the mech to come under fire and it was too high up to be in danger from mines. The shaft of steel punched through the thin armor that was designed to resist machineguns at most. It missed the cockpit but slammed through the gyro and into the fusion generator beyond. The reactor did not blow up per se but the suddenly released plasma cooked the pilot in the cockpit and fused the end of barrel to the mech. Thus when a Commando came around it found the stuck tank, trying to pull itself out, an easy target for its SRMs.

Other tanks ran strait into a hail of SRMs and lasers as the pirates became aware of the tanks bearing down on them. Some ran into a hail of SRMs while others were disabled when lasers melted and fused their treads together.

The tank that had the misfortune to go up against the Gladiator found its left track blown off and the wheels fused to the chassis. Even as the tank ground to a halt the crew continued to load and fire the gun as fast as they could. They maintained accurate aim even as the Gladiator let loose with its SRM6 and medium lasers. Three of the missiles missed and blasted craters in the street around the mech. One missile struck near the driver's spot blowing through the hatch and killing him instantly but leaving the rest of the tank crew relatively unharmed. The other 2 struck the right side of the tank, one destroying the other tread and blasting one of the wheels off, the other struck the right side turret blasting the armor there to pieces. The 2 medium laser sprayed over the tank melting armor off the tank but did not penetrate. Even during the constant attack the gunner and loader continued to fire the gun as fast as they could. But as they fired of the eight shot the PPC recharged and finished off the doomed tanks, the charged particles blowing through to the interior and blasted apart and roasted the crew inside.

"Break contact repeat break contact" came the order from Captain White. As the senior commander on scene he was in charge of the overall defense. Normally the Colonel would have been conducting the battle but he was with Alpha on the other side of the island and thus chose to hand over command to Captain White. "Status report."

"Black 1?" Lt Tam reported.

"Undamaged good to go sir?"

"Black 2?" silence "black 2 report"

"I saw a lot of missiles and explosion on their rout sir" Black 3 reported.

"Noted, Black 3, your status?"

"Not good, sir we're fine but some lasers hit the cannon I can see a slight bent on it now. Its not going to fire sir."

"Noted, Dog 1... Dog 1?"

"Didn't make it."

"Dog 2?"

"Good to go sir."

"Dog 3?"

"Good to go sir."

"Dog 4?"

"It rammed a locust and got stuck, got blasted apart. I was down a street from it." The voice sounded like Dog 1's.

"Alright all Bird and Dog unit pull back to point Gamma." Listing off the defensive position near the evac point.

"The evac finished then?"

"Yes we're to draw them out to the lower house so the Squids and Jarheads can get a crack at them."

A chorus of "yes sirs" came back as the tanks retreated.

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Brand listen to the pirate's radio chatter with growing dread. From the attacks it seemed to be only 7-8 tanks. But they did a severe amount of damage to the mechs. Only one Locust was destroyed out right but the other all received a severe amount of damage to their armor and some lost a weapon or 2.

"Those bastards are running after em boys." the pirate leader sounded very angry

"Oh what now? What the fuck is TAG?" came another voice, the line indicated it was a Commando.

That alerted Brand right up. The Periphery pirates might not know what it was but Brand, who was trained in the FedSuns and had some extremely rare Star League books on weapons in his possession, recognized it though he had never seen it in combat.

"Get to cover, run, move, now!!"

"What the fuck are you talking about Bra-"

At that moment 3 large explosion engulfed the Commando in question. Even more of a surprise 3 more hit the Wasp that had been trailing it. But knowing the state of Periphery mechs the warning system must have fallen into disrepair.

"Alpha 2, Alpha 3 report. Are you still there?"

Then a large boom cam from where the Wasp should have been. The SRMs must have blown.

"Alpha 1 check out what happened to those two. Did anybody see what happened?" though he knew what likely happen to Alpha 3, the Wasp. There wouldn't be much left

"I did" piped in Alpha 1" who was behind the two unfortunate mechs. "Six missiles from the East, I can't see any planes though"

"Damn it" Brand thumbed the line to the dropships with their better

radars. "Base do you see anything in the sky, two of the Hammers just got hit."

"Hold on Fist 1... yea there is a formation on planes to your south looks like 6 of the smaller ones Hasting met."

"Why the fuck didn't you warn me. You have the better radar and the clear views."

"Sir" the tech tried to explained" they were over 20 kilometers away. There are planes all over the sky here we didn't think they were a major threat. They were just circling there"

"What? 20 klicks. Are you sure?"

"23, yes they're the closest planes, there's another to your east and more moving in from the south west. Those are all still thirty to fifty kilometer away."

They were pretty much untouchable at that range

"Alpha 1 here, 3's gone ammo blew barely any legs left. Alpha 2 got one in the leg and two in the body. The missiles blew his right torso apart, the last one must have been what broke the leg, he fell over on a light pole to went right through the damage spot, impaled the cockpit. He's gone"

At that moment another salvo homed on Alpha 4, the Clint in front of the group tried to move and dodge behind some building but all the building in their area were small houses, offering little cover. 4 missiles went after him, one did miss and hit the house behind him but the other 3 tracked true. One missile blew the auto cannon completely off the right arm, fortunately the ammo didn't cook off. The other 2 struck the Clint right in the chest all the armor there was were blown completely off, but somehow it stayed standing.

"Fuck those things pack a punch. Fuck, shit, damn it! My cannon's gone."

"Sir they have to haves spotters around here, we have to do some



thing." Said Bill 'the Barbarian' Bart his second in command, in the Orion, over the private company line.

"Like what Bill? Burn the city around US?"

"Well, yes, that might flush them out."

"We will not attack civilians indiscriminately, we're better than that. Besides I considered it but the range of the TAG and potential hiding places means we'll have to burn everything for a mile around. In the time and fire power that takes would leave out mech over heated and out of position when they attack."

"Fuck that they just killed two of us right now. We're razing this city to the ground." With that the pirate light mechs began indiscriminately shooting into the houses around them adding more destruction to the damage they caused fighting the infantry and tanks.

"Damn it. All Fist elements hold fire we will not attack civilian houses."

"Sir there might still be people in those houses and the fire will spread. Are we going to let them do that?" Said Jessica Trent in the Thunderbolt.

"We don't have a choice Jess. We shoot them the Hammer will blow our drop ships to shreds."

Then another series of booms rang out as a Commando was struck by 2 missiles it stayed standing however and kept firing.

"Fall back to the high building, we can take cover there."

Suddenly the radio cracked to life. it was the dropships.

"Fist element Fist element we are under artillery bombardment. They have taken out all the bridges and the vehicles on the ground are being torn to shreds. "

"Where is the artillery coming from?"

"The ocean" that word fill him with despair. He couldn't do anything about that, it might as well be in orbit.

"How are you guys holding up"

"OK, they're focusing on the vehicle and personnel outside which is none of ours. Wait. There's reports of gun fire in the Hammer, Oh God somebody's locked the doors to the Hammer they're being shredded out there. They're screaming for help."

He noticed the pirate mechs beginning to turn back toward the docks. They had jump jets so they could get back to their ships.

Then from one of the company's private frequency came a voice he didn't expect to hear.

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USS Port Royal

She was quite surprised when they emerged into what must've been the bridge section. She had expected to be taken to the brig.

"Here is the situation miss Hastings." The captain began "We will prevail against the forces in the region. You can help determine of the end result will be a blood bath with every dropships and mechs destroyed or you can make this painless and maybe even profitable for your group."

"You landed a stones throw from of one of the largest military complexes on this world; this includes one of the largest Marine bases in the world. These troops specialize in heavy assault especially from the Ocean. There is 2 major forces inbound on land another ready to conduct an amphibious assault. Your forces will be caught in a pincer. They will not be able to retreat back to the Drop ships because they won't be there anymore. This ship along with several others will begin bombardment of the dropships. If they attempt to take off we hit them with more of Harpoons. Those are the big

missiles that hit you as you landed. They will be crushed by sheer weight of numbers. That's option one"

"The other option is what the Burron Cav got. You know them correct? They consider the conditions on this world a breach of the contract for their service. We hired them to our service, and we can pay in gold"

Reed began to outline what would be expected of the Fire Brands.

.....

LA

"So that's the deal Captain Brand do you take it?" Asked Hasting hopefully. She really liked the Fire Brands and considered them her friends. It would devastate her to see them die.

Brand signed "Like we have a choice."

Brand got on the comm to the company "They're 60 tanks converging on us from the East and North and more coming after them. We'll die under shear weight of numbers if nothing else. They have us out maneuvered, they have enough to stake out every street and just fire down it from long range we wont be able to hide anywhere if we go out to engage them we'll loose the cover of the high rises and be cut down by the fighters."

"So what do we do?" Asked Trent.

"We take out the Pirates."

"What?"

"They made us an offer through Hastings"

"Kid's alive" Trent voice perked up. They were particularly close though most of the Company considered the kid a little sister.

"Yea, she told us what we were, didn't let slip anything vital but it was enough to interest them into buying us out instead of fighting us.

It sounds good. Hasting got us the best deal she could under the circumstance." The kid learned a lot from going with Brand to the various negotiations. She was from a trading family and grew up all over the sphere, as a consequence she knew every major language and some not so major language in the Sphere. More importantly she knew the different body language; a person from one side of the Sphere had different posture and tells from other as a consequence of the diverse cultures and environment. That helped Brand in his contract negotiations.

"How good?"

"We get to keep our mechs and ships for one and a garrison contact to be hammered out later. But we have to help them take out these pirates. They'll herd the pirates toward us where they think is safe, then we take them out."

"We shoot them in the back basically" Trent said. "What's to stop the Blood Hammer from blasting out dropships to bits?"

"They have an assault team on the Hammer right now. The moment we get a confirmation that the Hammer's weapons are powered down and pointed elsewhere we open fire. If they can't take the ship they'll take it out with missiles and artillery. Either way as soon as our ships are safe we blast the pirates. I'm not happy about it but they did threaten our ships if we didn't help them.

"Get into positions every one, we out mass them 2 to one but that doesn't mean they can't hurt us. When they fall back here each pick a pirate and stay with it."

The pirates soon came charging back into the cluster of high rises pursued by missiles. The slower Gladiator was struck by one just before it managed to get behind the building. Brand took the leader for himself.

"What do we do now?" asked the battered pirate leader

"We wait for them to come to us. We're better more powerful than them we can smash those puny tanks together when they come to

us." Brand lied smoothly. "Those air breathers can't stay in the air for long. When they're gone we go out and smash them if they too afraid to attack us."

"Sir the Hammer's guns are powering down away and the gun ports are closing." The call came.

"All Fire Brands Fire!" he called out over the private comm.

His Zeus' carefully placed PPC ripped the Gladiator's right arm right off and with that came its PPC. Both medium laser lanced strait into its back. The armor already weakened by the missile yielded to the laser which punched through to the reactor destroying critical components and triggering the automatic shutdown. He shut off the frequency with the pirates to spare himself the curses, insults and threat that came spewing forth.

Not all mechs went as quietly as the Gladiator. A Commando's SRM store blew the blast channeled by the buildings knocking Jessica Trent's Thunderbolt back but she recovered nicely without any major damage, the same couldn't be said for the buildings on either side of the mech.

The Pirate mechs fell in short order with just one or two salvos. One Cicada managed to surrender before he was blasted apart by Bill Bart's Orion.

The battle of LA was over all brand could do was hope the locals were as good as with their words.

Fort Irwin, California
National Training Center
November 22nd, 2005/3020

Barry Wise was irritated. Ever since the CNN reporter had seen the footage of the Battle of Washington, he wanted to do a piece on these mercenaries. But now, as he finally had the chance to visit Ft Irwin, the current "home" of this *Buron Cavalry* and take a look at them (and, later on, interview their CO), a new problem reared it's ugly head.

A problem in the form of about 200 angry protesters blocking the entryway into the base.

"What's their problem anyway?", his cameraman, Pete Davis, asked.

"Not everyone likes the deal President Ryan is giving these mercs. Oh well, seems like it will take a bit till we get through here. Good thing we're early. Might as well get out and take a few pictures and ask questions, don't you think?"

"On my way, boss."

Leaving their OB van, Barry did a short introduction into the camera before both closed in on the edge of the crowd, about a hundred meters from the entrance gate. Signs were almost everywhere, many of them bearing messages Barry hadn't seen since the protests during Vietnam. He went to one of the more overt protesters, a hispanic looking man in his 40's, who was holding a picture of what appeared to be a dead girl with the word *Murderers!* written underneath it.

"Excuse me, sir. Barry Wise, CNN. Mind if I ask some questions?"

The man showed a somewhat surprised expression. "Sure. John Caballo," the introduced himself.

"Nice to meet you, John. So, could you tell me why you're here?"

"Isn't that obvious. The government is openly negotiating with that

off-world mercenary scum. They want to actually hire the same kind of murderers that killed my daughter. I say we should just take all their guns and Mechs and whatnot and put these monsters where they belong: INTO JAIL!"

The last part was as much directed at the crowd as at Wise and caused everyone able to hear it over the noise to agree, scream their support to the demand or simply throw in their own bit of opinion.

And then a ripple went to the crowd. "Over there!" someone shouted.

Wise looked into the same direction as the protesters and, on the veranda of one of the buildings behind the fence, saw several people in unfamiliar uniforms. 'So those are the people I'm here for', Wise thought.

"Look at the gall of those assholes", Caballo murmured. "They're standing there as if they're already owning the place."

Wise took another look at the mercenaries. From what he could make out from the distance, their expressions varied between confusion and outright apprehensiveness. He turned back to Caballo.

"Mr. Caballo, you are aware that these people helped the National Guard in Washington D.C. to put down the pirates before things escalated?"

"What kind of stupid question is that? Of course, they helped us. At gunpoint. Just proves them to be opportunistic bastards and somewhat smarter murderers than all that pirate scum. Wouldn't it be for the Army to have shown these bastards the consequences, they'd have done the same fucking massacres as those assholes in Chicago, Austria and the Congo! These guys are scum, pure and simp-"

Caballo's eyes suddenly sprang open, looking at the area behind the fence. Turning around, Wise's mind almost stopped. "Get that on camera!", he hurriedly yelled at Pete.

Several protesters had apparently managed to climb the fence using some kind of blankets to get over the wire. Now they were quickly

running towards the mercenaries. In the distance, Wise could already see some of the MPs from the gate closing in, desperately trying to stop the trespassers. Several more appeared behind the mercenaries. And then it happened. The small group of intruding protesters began throwing what looked like rather large stones. Their intended victims tried to evade and back off from their assailants. Too late. Wise could see a small spurt of blood and a strange looking figure falling down. The next moment, it dawned on him what was strange about the figure. It was a child. "Oh my god!" Wise didn't even register that it was him saying that. Next to him, Caballo turned ghastly pale. "No..." he whispered. Around them, the whole crowd was stunned.

On the other side of the fence, one of the mercenaries was running at the stone-throwers with murder on his face, only to be stopped by several of the now arriving MPs. More arrived and dogpiled the intruders. And then the situation changed again. The off-worlder that, till now, three MPs had struggled to hold back suddenly ceased his efforts, turned around (almost bowling over the same MPs that had tried holding him) and ran to the child. He went down on his knees and desperately screamed for a medic before beginning to administer first aid.

'God, look at all that blood', Wise thought, before turning to the camera. "Apparently, we just witnessed an attack on the off-world mercenaries by enraged protesters here at Ft Irwin. We will try to get some more information and will further report about the issue."

Behind him, an ambulance had just arrived and the medics had started loading the small girl into the vehicle.

Three hours later

Administration Building

Ft Irwin, California

"Barry Wise, CNN. This is Pete Davis", Wise introduced them to the man in front of him. Looking at the man, he estimated him in the early or mid-thirties. He was wearing a BDU colored in an odd urban camouflage pattern, with a unit insignia consisting of some kind of shield, including heraldry, inside a light blue circle on the left and some unfamiliar rank marking on the right shoulder.

The man shook his hand. "Major Andreas Staedele, Buron Cavalry. Nice to meet you." Gesturing at some chairs, he continued: "Please, take a seat. As far as I understand, you wanted to interview me since the day I arrived on this planet."

Both sat down on two of the chairs, facing each other over a small table holding some glasses of water. "That guy did his homework", Wise mused.

"Yes, Major. Thank you for inviting me to this interview. You don't mind if we record this on camera?" he asked.

"No, just try to get me from my good side", the man replied with a smirk. Wise gestured to the cameraman. Pete gestured a countdown.

"This is Barry Wise, CNN, and I am sitting here with Major Andreas Staedele of the Buron Cavalry, the off-world mercenary outfit that caused a stir in the last days due to the plans of President Ryan to hire them. Major, thank you for this interview."

"No problem, Mr. Wise. The pleasure is all mine."

"We all already know the rough details about your unit due to the answers you gave on the press conference yesterday, so I will get straight to the real questions. Would you tell our listeners just why you are here on this planet? What kind of fate caused you to first sign up on an invasion of our world and then suddenly turn around and defect?"

"Wow, that's quite a first question there. Now, Barry, I may call you Barry?" Wise nodded. "This question needs a rather long answer. So bear with me. Last year, my unit was decimated during what was supposed to be a routine assignment. Since then, the Buron Cavalry has been in severe financial problems. Then, a few months ago, we received an appointment regarding an anti-pirate mission from a number of Periphery Worlds to the "north" of the Inner Sphere. On the way there, we planned to stop at Antallos to load up on fresh supplies, mostly food. And information, of course. But then, Aden Vorax, the, well, you could call it despot of Port Krin, the only spaceport on Antallos, was scrounging up whatever pirates and

mercenaries he could get his hands on for the invasion of this planet. My unit was drawn in as Vorax had paid out or simply forced every available JumpShip in the system to carry his invasion force. This had already caused us to miss the appointment I had mentioned before. And then, Vorax pressed my unit into service for his little expedition by exploiting our troubles and making some thinly veiled threats to leave us and our families broke and stranded on Antallos. As easy pickings for the slavers." The contempt and sheer enmity in the Major's voice almost caused Wise to flinch.

"Your families, Major?"

"Yes, Barry. The Buron Cavalry has no formal homeworld, so we are, as long as we have no employer formally housing them, no other option but to take our families with us wherever we go."

"So, how came it that you decided to defect, Major?"

"Pretty obvious, isn't it, Barry? The moment your people fired those nukes at the dropships, it was clear that Vorax hadn't known anything about this planet. And with the way this contract was *negotiated*", the word was spat out like a curse, "and the dangers of running through a nuclear defense system, I decided to cancel the contract immediately. Not something I'd do under almost any circumstances."

"Thank you, Major. Now, you said that your unit was decimated last year. May I ask what happened?" Wise saw Staedele's face darken and his eyes taking on an expression the reporter had seen time and again reporting about various wars over his career. The voice of the Major became almost completely devoid of emotion.

"The Buron Cavalry back then consisted of an overstrength combined arms battalion. We were hired by a local noble of House Davion to perform a pre-emptive raid on the Combine borderworld Thestia. Local Combine nobility was gathering supplies in preparation for a series of raids on borderworlds of the Federated Suns. It was our job to destroy those supply stockpiles before the Dragon could put them to use. We succeeded. We succeeded, and immediately afterwards, we found out that, additionally to the militia units we were told to

expect, the 21st Galedon Regulars had been stationed on Thestria. A full DCMS Mech regiment. We ran into an ambush by most of their 1st Battalion and were bloodied something fierce, but could hold our own while slowly retreating. It was then that a scout lance of the Regulars found our dropships and began to attack the *Distant Home*, back then carrying our technical and medical support personnel, many of them dependents to our combat troops. And the rest of the Regulars' 1st Battalion joined in on that attack. With the *Distant Home* under fire, the fighting turned savage beyond belief. It became a mutual bloodbath. And, after almost an hour, it was over. We had beaten the Regulars. Most of their Mechs were littering the field as wrecks, a few were running as fast as they could."

Staedele's face took on an increasingly painful expression.

"We had beaten the Regulars. At the cost of every last machine in our Mech company save the command lance, our entire armor contingent, two of our three DropShips being wrecked beyond what we could repair in the short time we had and more than two thirds of our infantry dead. 327 men and women dead or crippled for life. It was a disaster. An unmitigated disaster. We packed up what was left as fast as possible and escaped from the wrath of the rest of the 21st to the JumpShip. Back in the Federated Suns, our employer apologised for the bad intelligence. Turned out they found out about the 21st being moved to Thestria exactly two days after our departure. Davion promised to take those dependents of ours that had lost their relatives in the military part of the unit and wanted to get out, as well as our invalids, and give them full citizenship, so that they could get a reasonable start together with the money from the compensation the unit provided them with. The least they could do, they said."

After that, an uncomfortable silence filled the room.

"My condolence, Major. So, how do you think things will continue from now on?"

"I don't know, Barry. President Ryan and Secretary Bretano are, from what I can tell, honest men, but apparantly, a lot of people are against even our presence on this planet. The next days will have to

tell, I guess."

"Now, Major, I was witnessing a rather shocking event a few hours before at the gate of this base. If the questions isn't too personal: How is the small girl? And what is your personal opinion about that situation?"

For a short moment, anger was burning inside the Major's eyes like an inferno, before it was replaced by something Wise couldn't quite identify.

"Beatrice Mell has suffered a broken skull. She is right now still comatose, but the surgeons say that her life is not in danger anymore. The protesters that threw these stones are right now in custody and I have been informed that they will face a trial. As for my personal opinion: A dependent of my unit has been attacked and almost killed. Right in front of her father. There's nothing I would like to do more than track down the people responsible and beat them to a bloody pulp and my entire unit is thinking likewise. You have to understand, Barry. This unit, it is like a family to me. How would you feel if a member of your family, a child to boot, was almost killed by a bunch of spiteful, violent bastards?"

Before Wise could answer, Staedele continued.

"But I won't do it. Because frankly, it won't change what has happened and your people promised me that these punks would face justice. And I trust you that you will serve it. I just hope something like that never happens again."

"Thanks, Major. Now, we're already overtime, so we'll have to end our interview here. Major Staedele, it was a pleasure to talk to you." Wise said while holding out his hand.

Staedele took it. "The pleasure was all mine, Barry."

"This is Barry Wise, CNN, reporting from Ft Irwin, California."

Fort Irwin, California
National Training Center

November 25th, 2005/3020

Major Staedele watched the few dozen protesters as he was driven through the entry gate of Ft Irwin. The signs still varied between savvy and simply stupid. *Get out of here, murderers. Mercenary scum, go home!* And so on. 'A lot less people than in the last days. Good thing they shipped us to this place in the middle of the desert. At least keeps the number of protesters down', he thought. The political shitstorm his deal with the current government had caused was still raging like an inferno, though it did show signs of slowly calming down. The crowd had been almost twice that size the day after the White House had informed the public. Not that Staedele could fault them for it. He and his people would have to earn the trust of the locals and that would take time.

Thinking about the outcome of the contract negotiations he had just finished, Staedele missed the Hummer stopping in front of the part of the Army Base that was now housing his unit. It actually needed the driver telling him that they had arrived. Staedele rubbed his eyes. The last few days for him had barely seen any sleep. He thanked the driver and set out for the small building they had reserved for administrative purposes. Nedeljko was already waiting at the door, he saw.

"Hey, Andreas, over here. Everyone's already waiting", his friend greeted him.

"Hi, Ned. I finalised the deal with Mr. Bretano. Just wait for the big meeting. Oh, and the crowd seems to shrink", he answered.

"Yeah, the attack from 3 days ago seems to have aftereffects. I still wish it wouldn't have happened."

Stadele nodded. He was just glad that none of his people had been armed at the time. The consequences of **that** would have been... interesting.

The actual consequences were that his unit had been forced to leave another temporary home as they had been resituated deeper into the base. And a video of a 10-year-old girl with a severe head wound and

her father desperately giving her first aid going around the planet. The latter one had caused a huge backlash in public opinion. It had also led to the base security taking their job more seriously and letting the protesters get away with far less from then on.

"Any news about Beatrice?", he asked.

"Yeah. The surgeons say that she'll make a full recovery."

"Thank god", Staedele answered with relief in his voice. "Good thing they were smart enough to send us over here. At least only the absolute morons come out here for their stupid protests. Let's go, Ned. I've got news for everyone."

5 minutes later

**Administration Building
Meeting Room**

Staedele watched the room. Everyone from the inner circle had been gathered. The officers, noncoms and Mechwarriors, his wife, his aunt and their respective assistants and several of the people that were responsible for the dependents. Signalling everyone to stop their conversations, he cleared his throat.

"Okay people, listen up. We, as of about 6 hours ago, are officially in the employ of the United States of America. I finished the negotiations with Secretary of Defense Bretano and signed the contract. Due to the legal situation on this planet, things are a bit complicated. We will have to register as a Private Military Contractor situated on planet for our new employers to actually be able to ratify the contract. Marie, Hanna, that's your job. We should hire some local lawyers, too. Their laws in the regard are pretty screwed up right now.

As it stands, we have a garrison contract with a duration of 10 years, with an additional clause that allows our employers during the last 6 months of that time to prolong the contract by another 5 years if they are willing to do so. During that time, our employer has full command rights over our assets. As it looks right now, we will be mainly used to train their military and provide technical assistance to them, which includes their full right to take a very good look at our stuff. Still, I want everyone to stay on their toes, there's nothing

preventing them from sending us into combat, even off-world. They don't trust us 100%, but as it stands, they can hold our dependents hostage at a whim and both we and they know it.

There is also a very high possibility that we will be seconded to that new Global Defense Initiative they're forming up right now. And if I'm not completely off, those fine people are right now looking into giving Vorax some personal payback. I, for one, wouldn't mind taking part in that."

There was a low murmur going through the room. No, nobody of them would mind that at all. Finding details about the contract "negotiations" the Cav had with Vorax in the Port Krin Militia's databanks had already done a good job easing down the initial paranoia of their new hosts.

"During the contract, we will be provided supplies and maintenance by our hosts, as well as a wage on par with our counterparts of the same rank inside their military. For that matter, a few of you will be promoted into a rank fitting their position and responsibilities. We'll do that later. But hey, congratulations, **Captain** Johnson."

This caused some cheering inside the room, especially from the infantrymen. Just as Staedele wanted to continue, he was interrupted, however.

"What about the gold?" someone in the crowd shouted.

"Well, good question. We will get it at the end of our contract. They did put a condition in. That being that we reinvest at least half of that into their planetary economy, but I don't see any problem with that. Given just what kind of hardware these guys are producing, there will be plenty upgrades for us to buy, not to mention the money we will likely spend privately. Hell, we might even expand in the coming years, if things go well."

Some murmurs were audible as all the gathered persons thought about what a good deal that was.

"Well, that's pretty much the most important things. Now, for a few

smaller things:

First of all, the old tradition with putting our flag up together with that of our employer will wait for a few weeks, 'till the political firestorm is over.

Secondly, we will be based here for the foreseeable time. The interviews will also continue, so get used to it.

Next on the list, and that goes for *everyone*: Nobody leaves the base for the next two months and even after that, it might be better for us to be incognito for a good time. As we have all seen, there are some rather stupid and resentful morons in the local populace.

And last, but not least: If you find yourself in the grasp of a reporter, try to not cause a big incident. Please. Would be best if you just sent them my way, I had enough experiences with them in the last days."

And then Staedele put up a mocking glare:

"Oh, and if anyone wants to go to Vegas after the 2 months are up, he will take a set budget with him and NOT take any loans. Is that clear? I'll put down the rules on that just like I did with the gambling dens on Port Krin."

This caused some chuckles throughout the room.

"So, anyone got a question?"

The entire room erupted into noise.

Earth, Sol System
Camp David Presidential Retreat
22 December 2005/3020

"Bob." Jack nodded in acknowledgment to the Washington Post reporter, a longtime friend and ally.

"Jack." It was still something of an odd feeling, calling the president by his first name, but Bob Holtzman was glad to call Jack Ryan a friend, and thus someone who he spoke to on a first name basis. The president had taken a rare opportunity for a break, and was currently entertaining his guests in a sitting room at the presidential retreat at Camp David. It had been a hectic year, but even the president got time off for Christmas.

"I was hoping that you could help me. Or maybe that I could help you. Perhaps it's the same thing. I hear we're talking about moving on the place where our recent pirate friends came from. Antallos, I think the name was."

As usual, the press was as, if not more efficient than the intelligence services Ryan had served in. "We are, but congress is a bit stalled at the moment – we've got some who are insisting on defense first. Some even seem to think we can get away with fortifying up and hoping the rest of the universe will go away. Arnie says it's because they just can't deal with the new reality. Personally, I'm more inclined to follow my wife's lead and blame it on pathological shortsightedness."

"Which is why I think the proposal I'm bringing has merit."

"We can't go public with this. We need to keep any military plans under wraps, at least for now."

"I was thinking more of the public support side. We've got a lot of people taking defense spending and allocation a lot more seriously than they were before, but we both know that a lot of people are still thinking of this as something they can keep at arms length, that a dropship dumping giant walking tanks on your city is something that happens to someone else, that they can go on with business as usual."

We need to make this real to them." Holzman took a deep breath. "I want access to one or more of the captured personnel. I don't mean a soundbite, or even an interview, I mean, full access. We'll publish the complete history of his life if need be."

There was a moment of silence as Ryan contemplated the notion. Holtzman gave him a moment and went on with the pitch. "I'm not going to give the old line that the people need to know, though I do believe they do. Rather, in this case they already do know enough to be thinking about the situation clearly and making informed choices. But for many people, it's not real enough. It's still something out of a game or novel, and they're thinking in old terms that no longer work. We need to show them what life is like from the other side, show them how the natives live, so to speak. Give them a sense of the scale of this new reality we face. I don't need or want to find out about weapons or politics, I need personal stories, life for the everyday Tom, Dick and Harry."

"Well, he's sold me." Both men turned, to find that their wives had noticed their conversation and decided to join the discussion. Cathy Ryan had an odd expression on her face. "I've heard a very personal social interest story, when I visited the medical facilities they set up just outside the city during the attack. And I think it would do a lot of good if more people heard it."

"Cathy, you've been holding out on me!" Libby exclaimed, in mock outrage. "You've got to tell me all about it."

"I was going to tell you," the first Lady protested. "But you kept on asking about the Conference on Laser Technology, and I never got around to it."

"You were at COLT?" Bob asked surprised. Cathy was a gentle soul by nature, and seemed out of place in a briefing on weapons systems.

"I lasted about fifteen minutes before I got tired of the technobabble and sic'ed my wife on them," Jack admitted ruefully. Seeing the confusion on his guests faces he explained, "Cathy's an eye surgeon. She's been working with lasers for quite some time now, and doesn't have a decade of government work to blunt her disdain for BS,

either."

Cathy blushed at the memory. "I think I made an impression. Though I did have to tell at one of those overgrown boys on the engineering team from MIT that my face was up here-" she gestured to her head "-and if he kept staring at my chest, I'd have my Secret Service minder shoot him."

They shared a laugh. "Not too many pretty women in the business making lasers for Uncle Sam, I suppose," Libby said.

"Well, I'm doing my part for promoting the working academic woman," Cathy said. "I think I'm still scheduled to speak to a few more schools about being a woman in the professional world." A sigh. "In my copious free time."

"We can reschedule some of that if you want, honey."

"No, that's actually the part of this First Lady business that I like."

"So what's this great story you've heard" Bob asked quickly, heading off the long diatribe on the condition of the modern working woman he saw in the making.

"Jack and I went to visit the troops right after the Battle of DC. I dropped by the field hospital and met a former colleague. Major Helen Norton. She told me about one the prisoners taken, a young woman who joined the militia primarily so she could bear arms for her own safety. It was a very powerful story, of a girl who learned the trade of a technician at her father's knee, and who daily lived in fear of exploitation or enslavement after she was orphaned." Cathy's eyes locked with those of the reporter. "Think you can do something with that, Bob?"

Holtzman returned here gaze steadily. "Yes. But I won't be. I'm too old, too set in my ways, too used to thinking in terms of American politics and society. I won't be able to give the fresh, informed and above all balanced view we need. This story will set the entire tone of all the stories that follow, shape the public perception of the entire inner sphere, or whatever we end up calling it. This is like the stories

that shifted the economic and political balance of Asia, on a far grander scale. The *Cresta* scandal is a piker compared to the enormity of what we need to disseminate to the public. This isn't just a story, it's a practically a PR campaign. For the whole Inner Sphere." Bob took a moment to catch up with his breath. "This is bigger than the *Post*, to be honest. I wouldn't have come to you at all except that American Journalists, as a group, aren't seeing the big picture enough. We have interviews with a thousand experts of every stripe and color, and the internet is flooded with raw data that probably goes down to how many shoes that had on that planet that was supposedly all a giant shoe factory. What we *don't* have is stories that show our new neighbors on a visceral human level. Even I didn't fully grasp the need for that at first, but when the closest thing we have in print to an attempt to understanding the people of the inner sphere on a personal level is a somewhat dubious lionization of the 'Glorious Hero of Mecca', well, it's clear we've fallen short of what we should be doing."

Jack shook his head. "I hadn't realized you had something so ambitious in mind. We're talking an officially endorsed . . . documentary? serialized biography?"

"We might need our own TV show," Bob said. The Holtzman's both looked less than pleased with that admission. The rivalry between print and TV news was a longstanding one. "But the point is that while this new GDI can run things on forward momentum for the time being, sooner or later, the people of Earth are going to have to deal with the people of the inner sphere on much more personal and direct terms, and it's the job of journalists to prepare them for that. We've been remiss enough as is."

"You're planning on putting together a team to work on this then." Cathy thought out loud. "Easiest way to do this would be to just assign you someone from the, what was it, honey? The alphabet soup?" Very much the surgeon, she was cutting straight to the mechanics.

"As much as I would love to make Ed Foley's day by asking him to provide someone for that, I think this is more a job for a military liaison," her husband replied. "In fact, we may as well kill two birds

with one stone, and get someone from the GDI. It needs a PR division itself, and if we're assembling ace media experts, we may as well get double duty from them."

"Does that mean they get paid twice?" Cathy asked wryly. "Don't tell our mercenaries about that, they might get jealous." That was good for another tension breaking laugh. Rule 37 had gotten much press after the first pirate landing, so Schlock Mercenary and its . . . unique brand of philosophy were now as well known as Mickey Mouse. Especially in the Ryan household, where Jack Jr and Sally alike were avid fans.

"We've already got the ball rolling," Libby explained, once they had all recomposed themselves "Bob called up Tom Donner and John Plumber to get them on board, not to mention stealing my protégé. I hope we can do this quickly, because I need my best girl back on the corporate beat. All the new defense spending requires a vigilant eye on the military industrial complex."

"I'll take up the issue with the other heads of state at first opportunity," Jack promised.

"That won't be until after the holidays," Libby protested. "This girl Cathy mentioned was captured by the National Guard right? So as Commander in Chief, you can give us access immediately."

"It's almost Christmas. Even reporters take holidays don't they?" Jack asked, in a final bid to avoid having to do anything work-like while on Christmas Holiday.

"Reporters are always ready for a good story, Jack, it's how we get the scoops"

The president groaned and bowed to the inevitable. He'd just have to find someone to delegate the task to.

ESA Headquarters
Paris, France
February 2, 2006/3021

The main seat of the European Space Agency was a rather nondescript, multistory flattop building right in the middle of the French capital, covered from top to bottom in white plates. The whole complex reeked of the modernity of the seventies of the last century, but on the plus side, the employees joked, one had a nice view of the *Tour d'Eifel*, the Eifel Tower during coffee breaks. It had been chosen as the place for the summit more for reasons of common courtesy than for pragmatic ones, even though it geographically pretty much lay in the middle of the affected parties, those being the NASA, ESA and the Russians. A couple of the smaller space agencies also had sent representatives, the largest delegation among those being the Japanese, whose word - as one of the world's foremost highly developed nations - carried almost as much weight as that of the 'Big Three'.

Arnold van Damm strode down the corridors paneled with polished wood with swift steps. Coming to think about it, President Ryan's chief of staff seemed to be spending the past months perpetually running and jetting from one national capital to another. Heck, he probably had visited more heads of state during the past 180 days than the Secretary of State during the whole past term!

Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Everson, GDI and Michael 'Mike' Griffin, NASA's chief administrator did their best to keep up with him. He had been informed that the rest of committé had already gathered, and letting so much international political clout wait never had been a good idea.

The dome-like conference room on the third floor was as busy as an ant heap, and around the huge black table in its center most of the various delegation's members had already taken seat. If he had had to guess, van Damm would have said that of the 80 people there roughly two thirds were scientists and politicians, the rest attachées of the NATO militaries. Marshal Grigoryi Andreyavich Egorov, the Russian representative to NATO had his head stuck together with

Anatoly Mikhailoyevich Perminow, the chief of *Roskosmos*, as the Russian Federal Space Agency was commonly called.

The many conversations in the large room started to die down once the attendants became aware of his presence, and without wasting further time van Damm stepped up behind the elevated speaker's desk.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to thank you for your presence today. My thanks also go out to our colleagues from the European Space Agency for hosting this meeting. President Ryan has asked me to act as chairman for the time being until preliminary questions have been cleared, and I've been informed that at least the range of topics has been limited beforehand via inter-agency channels. So, let's get this thing started. Mike?"

Griffin stepped up to the desk, shook van Damm's hand and immediately began.

"In our evaluation of the situation we - and by that I mean *Earth*, all of us - have found ourselves in, we have identified three main blocks of questions we have to address: One, what do we need? Two, what do we have? Three, how do we get there?" the wiry Marylander held up three fingers.

"It's no great secret that moving the defense satellites we used to blunt the attack brought us to the limits of our capacities. Well, luckily enough, the heavy lift fairy left some presents for us that have pretty much solved all our ground-to-space lift problems for the foreseeable future, even though that lady came here with an attitude." There were some amused chuckles, but Griffin was grounded enough to know he was not particularly good at making up jokes on the spot.

"Now, with the one grand problem that inhibited most of our plans and ideas basically eliminated over night, we are down to the tricky part: making our ideas *work*. And not only that, but also changing our focus from a decidedly scientific point of view to what some here most likely will call 'mundane' affairs. Well, excuse me, but the defense of our homeworld simply does have higher priorities than putting up a probe that investigates the irregularity of sunspots or placing a telescope up there that hunts dark matter in the Andromeda

galaxy."

There was wide agreement on that particular point, even though van Damm thought he could see a couple of blank stares when he carefully observed everybody's reactions around the table.

Given that the agencies gathered in the conference room where looking at the greatest increase in funding and manpower in their collective histories the mood and the faces around the table were decidedly somber. Van Damm knew why. Shana Dale, NASA's deputy had explained it to him when he had asked in a calm moment why half the space community had become so grumpy after the euphoria of possessing all the new goodies had evaporated.

'A good amount of the concepts we are working on now could well be in use today,' she had told him, 'but most of them were either not flashy enough or were outright considered too expensive. And now, after some of those people have begged you on their knees for the better part of the last twenty years to fund their work to no avail the government suddenly expects them to get it all done now, immediately, *pronto*.'

"First point is getting started on orbital infrastructure and cleaning up space from debris," Griffin continued. "And to work in this environment, we need lighter space suits. We have only our clumsy ones, and those that have come in our possession via the ships we have captured. The former are unwieldy, as anybody using them can tell you, the latter are still too valuable and are needed elsewhere."

"That sounds like something downright earthly," Ronald Harris chuckled. "I had thought all we'd be discussing here would be rayguns and knights in space," the seventy three year old former construction contractor-turned-senator commented.

"To be honest, senator, the problem is hardly a new one. There have been initiatives to get a lightweight space suit built by at least the last three NASA administrators, myself not included," Griffin responded truthfully.

"Then why don't we have them yet?" Senator Barbara Eligman from Virginia leaned forward and fixed her green eyes on him. Griffin

could see the other politicians imitating her pose. In his mind, he was trying to find a way to make the answer sound as dispassionate as possible. Senate committees were the bane of his existence.

"Is because of dog and pony show, nyet?" a Russian scientist whose name eluded him commented dryly into the common silence, and despite himself Griffin had to smile.

"Yes, sir, I think that describes it rather fittingly. The USA and Russia are the only nations represented here with a manned space programme, and Russia never has had the funding to pursue these kinds of secondary projects. As for us, well, as my colleague has said, it's the dog and pony show, the way our budgeting works," he shrugged and focussed on the congresswoman. "If we present two positions to the Senate committee, both costing \$ 300 million, the one being a probe that goes to Mars and makes superb pictures and just happens to be built by contractors in some party friend's district, and the other being a project solely headed by NASA whose summary function basically is that an astronaut can wear smaller gloves... tell me, which one will get funding?" he asked her innocently.

Barring an answer, he continued.

"The point of the lightweight suit is two-fold. For one, we need it for the construction work in vacuum and zero gravity, where we want our people to be able to get things done and not need half an hour to use something as simple as a screwdriver. We are looking at potentially hundreds of workers on a site here, which means hardly all of them will be military personnel. That alone requires that we make that ultimate job up there as easy as possible. Face it, ladies and gentlemen, within the next five years we are looking at a complete new branch of jobs here, a new industry."

Jobs meant happy taxpayers meant re-election. Griffin was an old battlehorse in this kind of business and knew which buttons he had to press to get a point across. 'And now, to the military', he smirked inwardly.

"The second point is large-scale training in a zero-G environment and testing of the suit in possibly harmful situations." What a lovely euphemism for combat *that one* was. "As I take it, and as has been

explained to me by our foremost experts on the topic," who had been an euphoric group of junior engineers and technicians at the Ames Research Center, "our men and women will face a multitude of threats and dangerous scenarios out there, which is why this suit is so necessary. Flexibility, durability and user friendliness are what will be necessary. Furthermore... ."

"Excuse me, Mr. Griffin," a deep voice interrupted him. Griffin looked up from the few notes he was working with. One of the ESA representatives had stood up. The man was tall, almost seven feet, had dark brown hair and wore frameless glasses.

"Ludwig Kronthaler, ESA Head of Resource Management," he introduced himself. "I have a proposal due to which, I think, we can abbreviate much of today's proceedings."

Intrigued, Griffin motioned him to go ahead.

"The tasks we face should be divided in a way that serves the strengths and weaknesses of the here assembled members best. My Japanese colleague, Professor Ishimura," he nodded towards a stocky, balding middle-aged man in the middle of the Japanese delegation, "has suggested that ESA and JAXA concentrate on robotic exploration, automated survey devices and unmanned construction, while the RFSA and NASA focus on the manned space flight aspects. Not only does this recognize our two agencies wide experience with unmanned devices, it also is the logical step considering the vast gap in funding and existing infrastructure between us and 'The Big Two'. Call it process optimization."

"I will have to talk with the President, as will my Russian colleague," Griffin frowned, "but I see the merit in your proposal. Lieutenant-Colonel Everson, has the GDI any objections to such an idea?"

Everson, ex-Air Force, now GDI, shook his head.

"No, sir. As long as it works and gets the job done, the GDI is interested in the result, not in the process. Besides, it's your field of expertise," he shrugged.

"The second point is actual offworld construction. For the foreseeable future that specifically means the moon and most likely, Mars... ."

"We can use the basic idea of the 'Constellation' programme for that," Douglas Cooke, NASA's chairman for exploration systems chimed in. "While the launch vehicles are now obviously obsolete, 'Constellation' pretty much describes the three steps we want to master: orbit, Luna, Mars. Now, the *components* used are back on the drawing board... ."

After four hours, van Damm's ears were ringing from the chatter of the politicians, scientists and soldiers around him, but he had to agree that progress had been made. Indeed, quite a number of pre-contact programmes still very much fit the new requirements, like the Constellation programme, and in many cases all that had been needed to be done was to upscale them significantly. The moon would provide the He3 for Earth's newfound fusion power and would be the site where the global space agencies would test their equipment and concepts for colony building. And the GDI was itching to get to work on Luna as a place to fit into its growing defensive concept.

In the short term they were looking at scientific outposts and test stations, but not too far down the road Lieutenant-Colonel Everson guaranteed him, there were industrial applications and much, much more. Earth's small grey companion was going to become a huge playground, and for the first time, everybody had money to buy himself some toys...

February 7th, 2006
Fort Irwin, California
United States
Earth

Major Staedele had to admit that the quarters he and his wife had been issued were quite nice, as he rooted through the refrigerator for a beer.

When he had agreed to the contract with the American government, he had been very cautious and somewhat concerned about how they would treat his unit. After the battle of Washington, where his unit had proved itself, his unit had been well treated and as the months went by his concern about being backstabbed gradually faded. And he had to admit what they were doing wasn't exactly what he had expected from a garrison contract.

The unit's work at the National Training Center, where they were now stationed, was proving to be very interesting. As a garrison job, it was probably one of the best he'd ever heard of, they weren't really expected to be the only unit fighting, their job was more along the lines of simply training groups of already talented officers to adjust to the realities of Mech combat. That they weren't expected to do much fighting was a fact that kept his wife happy, as head technician she was glad to not have to keep patching up the unit mechs after combat.

In addition, the fact that there was so much technology on this Earth that was considered lostech back in the Inner Sphere, a fact that he still couldn't get over, only make his wife that much happier that he had accepted the contract that President Ryan had offered to them when they had first arrived. And he worried it might be impossible to pull her away the planet after a few years of living here.

"Andreas," he heard his wife call him from the living room where she was watching TV. "You should come out and see this, the American and Russian presidents are about to issue a joint statement regarding the Nuclear Rearmament Treaty they just signed."

"Nuclear Rearmament Treaty," he said mockingly. "Only on this planet would you find a group of people, who already have probably ten times more nukes than any of the Great Houses, who would speak of nuclear rearmament."

"Andreas," his wife repeated somewhat sharply. "If you don't hurry you're going to miss the beginning of the press conference."

Andreas shook his head as he headed towards the living room to join his wife. He could never understand his wife's love of technical issues or her fascination with learning about the internal politics of whatever world their unit was stationed on. He had always been more concerned about strategy and tactics and ensuring the unit didn't get stabbed in the back by its employers. He would privately admit that it did make her a good match for him, and that her knowledge of a planet's internal politics had helped out the unit a time or two

Once he had sat down beside his wife on the couch in front of the television, he gave her a quick kiss before he opened his beer. He took a sip and leaned back putting an arm around his wife, while he waited for this press conference she was so eager to see. Several seconds later the view that television was displaying switched, from an attractive anchorwoman, to a scene from the inside of what he thought might be the White House.

As President Ryan and the Russian President Grushavoy began their joint statement, it quickly became apparent that no matter where you are government announcements are exactly the same, no matter what planet you happen to be on, even if it's a planet from the past or some alternate universe.

When this became evident, Andreas lost interest, giving only half his attention to what they were saying, he was more intent on settled back and enjoying the fact he had one arm around his wife and a beer in his other hand.

His attention was partially drawn back to the television once the reporters started asking questions. His attention was caught by aggression one particular reporter asked.

"President Ryan, your speaking of refurbishing and reactivating our country's nuclear production facilities, along with building new production facilities."

"Exactly how much will this treaty cost our country?"

President Ryan responded.

"The Nuclear Rearmament Treaty in of itself does not cost our country anything. The treaty between the United States and Russian Federation is to allow both countries to restart nuclear production, and also to standardize nuclear warhead types to allow for interoperability for all future delivery systems. Another important part of the treaty covers the exchange of observers at all points of the production and storage process, so that neither country will feel threatened by the increasing stockpiles of nuclear weapons each will be maintaining for the defensive of Earth."

"The companion legislation for this treaty which is going through Congress right now, to resume nuclear weapons production inside of the United States, calls for 4 trillion dollars to be set aside over the next 20 years. This money will go to refurbishing, reactivating or expanding currently existing or mothballed production facilities. Additionally some of the money will be spent on the building of additional production facilities. But the majority of the money would go to actual production of nuclear material."

Andreas inhaled his beer and started coughing when he heard the price tag attached to their nuclear program.

"4 trillion dollars!" He gasped incredulously, as he tried to clear the beer out of his lungs.

He exchanged a disbelieving glance with his wife as he did the math, based on what they had calculated the Dollar being worth during negotiations over the unit's contract, that would be the equivalent to almost 1.2 trillion C-Bills. His wife gave him a shocked look, as she realized something.

"You could buy almost One Hundred and Fifty Thousand BattleMasters for that price." She said shakily.

"Nuclear bombs are rare," he slowly said to his wife. "But I hadn't realized they were that expensive to build. It's no wonder the Great Houses don't have many."

"But I would like to know is, how the hell the people here able to build so many of them without bankrupting themselves?" he asked.

He turned back to the television to give himself some time to think and get over the shock of the announcement by the president.

However, he didn't have any time to recover from that first shock, before a question from another reporter stunned him again.

"Mr. President, during the Cold War the United States was producing at its peak, around 2700 nuclear bombs per year. What sort of production figures can we expect from this new armament program?"

Andreas blinked to stunned to do anything more. He was now sure that he was going insane. He didn't think that all of the Great Houses of the Inner Sphere combined could produce that many warheads in a decade.

President Ryan looked pained by the question.

"Well," he said reluctantly. "Because the experts on the subject will probably be able to give you a reasonable guess as to how many warheads we will be producing by looking at the number of production facilities & the level of activity at such facilities. I will say that it wouldn't be unreasonable to expect the production of at least 10,000 warheads per year, between the United States and Russian Federation, once all the current and future production facilities are fully operational.

Andreas stared at the television, this was too much. He glanced at the beer can in his hand, before slowly putting it down. Beer wasn't strong enough for this type of insanity he thought, he definitely needed something stronger.

Post Exchange Food Court
Fort Irwin
California
Earth
15 December 3020/2005

Tasha flipped through the book she had just bought. It was, as she understood it, one of a series of thriller novels about the major political figures of the Inner Sphere set in the near future over the next half century. There had been a huge display in the PX for "Battletech" material. Tasha had bought this particular volume, *Heir to the Dragon*, because it featured Theodore Kurita.

Overall, while the book was an entertaining read, the events in it ranged from the scarily plausible to the ludicrous. Hanse Davion marrying the heir of the Lyran Commonwealth to create a super Successor State seemed pretty implausible but on further thought might have some merit. Comstar giving the Combine actual Star League era mechs was just flat out implausible. But Theodore reforming the DCMS into an actually effective fighting force sounded not only plausible, but nightmarish from the point of view of any good Federated Suns citizen.

And Tasha was a good FedSuns citizen. Of course, the locals here didn't realize how good; otherwise they wouldn't have let her roam around free on the base. They had made it a point of separating the hapless civilians who had somehow gotten caught up in Vorax's little invasion scheme from the actual die-hard pirates. They had even been apologetic when they had explained that they couldn't repatriate her right away. So while the pirates were stuck in a small, fenced in plot of desert, Tasha and the other civilians had been put in guest quarters and given a living stipend until the people in charge figured out what to do with them.

"Ah, Tasha," a familiar voice called out. "Good day to you!"

Tasha looked up from her book to see Kearny. They weren't friends, although their relationship had become decidedly less antagonistic since they had both become trapped on this planet. Before, they had

been adversaries. Now they had an unspoken understanding; she didn't tell the locals that he was ISF, and he didn't tell the locals that she was MIO. His name wasn't really "Kearny" any more than hers was really "Tasha".

"Kearny," Tasha replied. She noted at the suit and hangar in his hand. "You seem unusually chipper today."

"I have an interview scheduled this week," Kearny said, obviously pleased about something. And being obvious about one's emotions was one of the first things a spy got drilled into them. But Kearny was not only pleased, he seemed positively giddy.

"More locals who want to know about life in the Inner Sphere?" Tasha asked. "I thought we already covered everything they wanted to know."

"In a manner of speaking," Kearny said. "But as you know, there's nothing like a first hand account."

"So is there something special about this interview?" Tasha asked.

"I suppose I could not tell you and leave you guessing," Kearny replied. "But no, it's no big secret and I want to see your reaction. I'm going to meet with the Emperor!"

"The Emperor?" Tasha echoed, mystified. "I didn't think this planet had an Emperor. Hell, it barely has a government!"

"No, no, not the Emperor of the planet," Kearny said, exasperated. "The Emperor of Japan, direct descendent of the goddess Amaterasu. And better yet, one of the direct ancestors of our noble Coordinator will also be there." He beamed at her. "It's a great honor. See you in a week, Tasha."

Tasha watched Kearny saunter off like a happy child off to see his dream come true. But her mind was racing as she went over the implications of Kearny's statement. Obviously, he was going to try to persuade the locals to ally themselves with the Combine. And given what she had seen so far, this planet possessed both the firepower

and industrial might to seriously affect the balance of power between the Successor States.

Tasha didn't know what Kearny's odds of success were, but it was pretty clear that she had a new mission beyond just gathering data on the locals and reporting it back to her superiors. Now she had to try and sway them to the Federated Suns' side too.

In effect, she was now House Davion's ambassador to this world.

ROM Headquarters
Hilton Head
Terra
31 December 3020

"Precentor Stoker," an Adept said, addressing the august personage of Comstar's head of espionage division, ROM. "How are you enjoying the party?"

Stoker took a moment to regard the lowly Adept. Under normal circumstances, the gulf of rank between the two of them meant that this young man would never have dared to address him directly. But the annual New Years party was one of those few occasions when underlings would mingle with superiors, but this direct approach was still unusual. Stoker wondered what he wanted. He vaguely recalled this seeing this young man working a desk in on of ROM's analysis departments.

"Quite well, Adept," Stoker replied smoothly. "Although I think the wine has been watered down a bit more than usual. And you, Adept?"

"I'm doing well enough, Precentor," the Adept answered. He hesitated before forging on. "I'm actually curious if any new information has come in on Vorax's Army."

"Ah?" Stoker said. "I've heard nothing. While an entire pirate regiment disappearing might concern some near Periphery world, it can't be too important."

"Hmm... it fits," the Adept murmured thoughtfully.

"What fits, Adept?" Stoker asked, annoyed.

"Oh, sorry, Precentor," the Adept said hurriedly. "I've been looking at the intel data that was handed out to Vorax's Army, and the more I look at it, the more concerned I get."

"What's to be concerned about?" Stoker asked. "The data is obviously faked. I mean, look at it! You'd think Vorax was going to attack

Terra! Which is ridiculous on the face of it. And even if he were mad enough to do so, our defenses can more than handle one pesky pirate regiment."

"Of course the data is faked, Precentor," the Adept agreed. "But it's a very, very good fake. It's too good a fake in fact."

"What do you mean, Adept?"

"If you look closely at the data, Precentor," the Adept began, "you'll see that while the planet pictured is Terra, it's not the Terra of the present day. In fact, it's not the Terra of any day that I can find records for. There's too many small satellites in orbit, and not enough large stations. Where are the orbital factories, the ship yards, and all the other signs of space industrialization? The planetary technology and architecture and technology looked all wrong too. Why, there's video of engagements with aircraft and wet navy ships straight out of the twentieth century! And then there's this advanced technology loot that our Port Krin station reported. Where did THAT come from?" The Adept paused and took a breath. "My point, Precentor, is that if all this is a fake, it's a fake that's far, far too good to have been manufactured by Vorax. For that matter, we'd be hard pressed to make something so good."

"So what do you think is going on, Adept?" Stoker asked thoughtfully.

"I think Vorax is being played," the Adept replied. "I think there's an advanced lost colony out there that somehow suborned the Drakon's people, gave them fake data, and then sent them off to Port Krin with the very intention of luring in pirates into a trap in order to gain mechs, jumpships, and dropships. They're advanced, probably a Star League colony, but short on people and resources, hence their need to lure pirates in."

"That theory is a little... wild, Adept," Stoker said.

"It's the most conservative theory I have, Precentor," the Adept replied. "Frankly, I've always been skeptical with the whole 'It's Kerensky's Army' thing some people use to explain everything, but it makes the most logical second choice. And for really wild theories, I

can always say that twentieth century Terra has somehow time traveled to the present..."

"Ah, let's leave the sillier theories out of this, Adept," Stoker interrupted. He thought for a moment. "Hmm, your theory does seem a bit dodgy, but if the underlying data is sound, we will definitely have to investigate this. Good work, Adept... what was your name again?"

"Fox," the Adept replied. "Adept XV Mulligan Fox."

**Firing Range
Fort Irwin
California
Earth
12 March 2006**

Two might war machines strode across the dry ground. The battlemechs took their designated positions, ready to demonstrate to any and all onlookers why they had been considered Lords of the Inner Sphere battlefields for centuries.

One was a *Hunchback*, Quasimodo reborn through the efforts of many engineers piecing the hero machine back together using components from three different *Hunchbacks* that had fallen around the world. It shone as if new, and was in fact better than new. On its shoulder was something never before seen in the annals of Battlemech warfare, a new kind of Autocannon capable of varying the size of its burst fire in order to constantly balance range against firepower. Quasimodo demonstrated the ability this day, reaching out to tap targets six kilometers away with light fire, and utterly blasting other targets at ranges as short as three hundred meters.

But alas, all eyes were on Quasimodo's partner this day.

"Is that a *Mad Cat*?" one of the visiting dignitaries watching the demonstration asked.

And indeed, the mighty machine did indeed resemble the iconic *Mad Cat* of Battletech lore. Its cylindrical body, bird legged gait, thin arms, and boxy missile launchers formed a shape nearly unmistakable to all observers. But as the General at the podium explained, this mech too had been assembled from the fallen. The voracious forces of Vorax had possessed few *Catapults* and *Marauders*, and all had fallen in battle. Their remains had been taken by skilled engineers and combined in an experiment of battlemech construction. Thus did the *Mad Cat* leap from the pages of fiction and into the real world, wielding the best weapons of Earth and Inner Sphere alike.

In demonstration of its combat prowess, the *Mad Cat* did unleash

streams of coherent protons and photons upon the dead and obsolete tanks serving one final purpose for their masters. Missiles forged in the many factories of Earth leaped out and completed their destruction in fire and flying shrapnel.

But what's this? A challenger has entered at the far end of the field, seeking to demonstrate its own prowess! But this challenger was but a lowly tank, a lowly box thing on treads with none of the elegant lines that the Lords possessed. Why it was to laugh that such a thing could hope to challenge the mighty battlemechs!

But challenge the tank did, for it charged its betters even as consternation rose up among the onlookers. The tank wove through its dead older brethren, refusing to accept their fate to be mere target practice. The mechs withheld their fire, perhaps stunned at the tank's temerity.

The tank neared and the mechs could no longer accept such insolence. The onlookers gasped and swore as the mechs opened fire on intruder. Quasimodo's unleashed the full fury of its VAC on the tank's glacis plate, shattering armor and sending shards flying everywhere. The *Mad Cat's* speared the poor foolish tank in its side, also scattering armor, this time in the form of vapor and molten globs.

But miracle of miracles, the tank kept coming on! And as it came, its turret swiveled to bring a cannon as great as Quasimodo's own on the mighty *Mad Cat*. And with a roar of fire and smoke, a flag popped out of the tank's muzzle and unfurled, delivering the message stitched in its threads.

BANG! YOU'RE DEAD!

"Ladies, gentlemen... and members of the press," the General at the podium said as the tank drove between Quasimodo and the *Mad Cat*. The proud vehicle drew to a stop beside the General and the woman with the laptop that controlled it by remote. "I am proud to announce that we have finalized the designs for the first anti-BT tanks using the newly perfected Variable Autocannons and point eight grade production armor. Production is expected to start in..."

Jumpship *White Elephant*
Earth Orbit
Earth
"East" Periphery
19 March 2006

Sitting in the seat on the bridge of the *White Elephant*, Captain Kurt Benson surveyed his domain with ire and grumpiness. His mood was caused mostly by the fact that his Jumpship was no longer truly his. This was perfectly illustrated by the people who crowded his bridge.

There, over at the navigation station, his navigator Damian was giving lessons to bunch of local barbarians. Over at another station, several "scientists" of dubious education had their so-called computer plugged into the *White Elephant's* main frame and were currently poring over its programming. Off to the side, more primitives were doing wiring work of some kind, installing some gizmo or other. And of course, there was the ever threatening presence of the soldier by the bridge hatch.

It wasn't all bad, Benson had to admit, even if to just himself. The locals had been busy going over every Jumpship in the aborted invasion fleet. They wanted to (ha!) *learn* how to build their own, so of course they wanted to examine everything. And in the course of their investigations, they had taken to sending up supplies, crafting replacement parts, and in general refurbishing the Jumpships as they went along. A real boon to the fix up work had been discovered on the *Kyp Brahnigan* in the form of a collection of maintenance manuals for *Invader* class Jumpships. Now every *Invader* had at least one copy.

But what really concerned Benson was the locals' urge to *tinker*. Mucking around with the mainframe's programming was bad enough. But they were also installing all sorts of dodgy gear from new sensors to something called a "land network" (whatever the hell that was). The locals claimed that their stuff wouldn't hurt anything, but Benson wasn't so sure.

Still...

Benson glanced at the flat screen that had been attached to his station. True, it was no holographic imager, but the images were crisp and clear and displayed everything relevant a Captain might need to know about the *White Elephant's* status in a single glance. Even better, the display was customizable to suit his preferences, an almost unheard of extravagance in any computer system, let alone something built by primitives.

And that was just the tip of the iceberg. Benson's chief engineer just couldn't stop singing the locals' praises. Maintenance issues long deferred by lack of money and parts were finally being fixed. New, strangely high tech diagnostic and power tools were being added to the repair shop inventory. And most unnerving of all, several of his original crew members had signed up for some of the locals' correspondence courses, learning things they should have been teaching the local primitive barbarians.

Of course, all this activity wasn't just for the hell of it. If he couldn't figure it out for itself, the local news told Benson what his ship was going to be used for. Obviously, the locals were going to go launch a reprisal raid on Vorax and Port Krin. The only question on everyone's minds was whether "Earth" – and here Benson's mind shied away from the unsettling implications THAT piece of knowledge threw up – was going to just raid Port Krin or move in and take over outright. The GDI was playing their plans close to their collective chests, but the consensus of was that they were going for a total take over.

Benson was skeptical about the whole thing. How could such primitives possibly hope to beat Vorax on his own ground? At the moment, Benson was expecting these guys to try, fail, and then drop a nuke or three on Port Krin in frustration. And where the hell did the locals get...

"But why not?" one of the navigation students said, voice raised to a near shout. That drew Benson out of his own brooding thoughts. "Look, you said it yourself. The navigation math isn't any more complicated for jumps along the edge of the jump denial zone than it is at the standard points. Why can't you jump in closer to the target planet by plotting your destination along the sphere on the planet's side of the sphere?"

"Because... because it's just not done," Damien sputtered. "Everyone uses standard points."

"Is there a problem here?" Benson asked, getting up from his seat and swimming through the microgravity to the group.

"Captain," Damien said with relief. "Please explain to this guy why we always use standard jump points to jump into a system."

"Is that all?" Benson asked. "We use standard points because it's the safest place to jump in to."

"But why?" the upstart student navigator asked exasperated. He pointed to a screen displaying a wireframe model of a generic star system. "Look, the star has a gravity well where KF drives can't work safely. I get that. The gravity well translates into real space as a spherical zone around the star where you can't jump. And anywhere outside that sphere, you can jump using the same calculations as the standard points without resorting to the complexity that pirate points have. So why don't you guys just jump to the point along the sphere closest to your target destination?"

"Because it's dangerous," Benson replied, strangely happy. Finally, he got to lord his superiority over these yokels! "You can never know where the planet is at any given time and they create jump denial zones of their own."

"That's stupid," the idiot local protested. "How can you NOT know where the planet is? We're not talking the Death Star here. We're talking a planet that orbits a star in an entirely predictable orbital path. If a planet's last known location isn't too old and has a reasonably circular orbit around its primary, you should be able to calculate where the planet is *right now*."

"The planet has gravity too," Benson pointed out, disgruntled. He hadn't expected such a comeback. "It'll bulge out the... the jump denial zone."

"The planet has a known mass," the other guy countered. "You should

be able to calculate the maximum possible bulge possible and jump in a bit further than that."

"There's..." Benson searched his mind for possible other arguments. Why did Jumpships always use standard points again? "Standard points are clear of debris. Jumping in on the ecliptic increases the chances of collision with space debris."

"Oh, please. Space is mostly empty," the know-it-all snot said. "The hyperspace bubble will annihilate anything occupying the space you're jumping into. I have a better chance of winning the lottery than a jumpship getting hit by some rock."

"There... there might be a planet you missed or forgot to account for," Benson said desperately.

"In a *known and mapped* star system? Are you serious???"

originally written by Chris O'Farrell

The Pentagon
Arlington, Virginia
Earth
March 9, 2006/3021

It was quite a view from 200 kilometers above the surface of the Earth.

At such an altitude, high above all but the thinnest traces of the Earth's atmosphere, one could look down across vast distances, observing forest and desert simultaneously across entire countries, or if the sun was below the horizon, marvel at the strings of lights that marked out the traces of human civilization across the vast continents. Of course, no human could really see anything outside of the most general features on the surface of the planet, but with the right optics technologies, all manner of things could be seen from space that were not visible from the surface of Earth...including many things that Governments would rather have hidden from prying eyes.

Of course given that fact, it had not taken at all long for development to begin on the first generations of surveillance satellites after Sputnik had started to circle the globe. As the years had passed, tens and then hundreds of such platforms had been put into orbit by many countries, starting with basic 'look-down' cameras that took 'happy snaps' of the placidly rotating planet underneath them, before dropping film canisters back down to Earth –and hopefully to the people it worked for and *not* the other guy. It was a slow and clunky system, but the results spoke for themselves and billions of dollars, pounds and roubles had been poured into R&D, slowly supplementing and then replacing these first generation of systems with more specialized and powerful technology.

Of course as time rolled on, these systems orbiting in the harshest environment known to man had slowly started to break down and become useless, at which point most were told to crash into the atmosphere and disintegrate in a glorious -if short lived- fireball, the better to help reduce the increasing problem of 'space junk' around the planet. Occasionally however, a satellite for whatever reason did

not listen to its masters when it was told to kamikaze and stubbornly continued to orbit on Sir Isaac Newton's dime. The good news was that most of these traitors *were situated in low orbits meaning that their orbits would succumb to persistent friction from the thin edge of the Earth's atmosphere and decay *anyway*...but some 'defunct' objects in orbit would gain a rare second chance at being useful to their human masters.

A Soviet Recon bird launched by the USSR in 1986, Cosmos-1810 had performed its tasks obediently and well for some time. But when it had been instructed to kill itself, the de-orbit motor had failed, a two hundred Ruble piece of wire having unknowingly come loose during its launch into orbit meaning that it would *never* fire. And while it was still 'alive' with its solar panels still gathering enough energy to run its on board systems, its days were none the less numbered. *Where* it would crash was now a completely open question –hopefully a NATO country was the joke going around Moscow- but its fate was never in doubt...until now. Far below it, men it neither knew nor cared about had turned their gaze towards Cosmos-1810 as they considered if it suited their purposes, finally deciding that it was precisely what they were looking for.

And so they made their final preparations, waiting patiently until the time was right...and finally, that time had come.

Powerful ground based radar systems were now tracking the satellite as it descended to the perigee in its not quite circular orbit, 180 miles above the surface of Earth. Indeed, with the right information and the right weather, one could easily see the tiny dot of light with the naked eye as it drifted across the heavens, if looking at busted space junk was something to interest you, at any rate. Of course, for its masters it was ideal; *no-one* in their right mind would be paying any attention to the thing as it drifted its way through space, it simply didn't matter enough to anyone on a normal night to care about.

But tonight was most assuredly *not* a 'normal' night.

It all started as the Recon-Sat flew its way from South West to North East over the Tajik SSR and the low point in its orbit. Ground based observers checked the data, and not too far from the capital of

Dyushambe, six large rectangular structures spaced evenly around a hexagonally shaped building, started to rotate in perfect unison. Their movements were impossibly slow, but an observer on top of the mountain with them 'in the loop' would have swiftly realized the rate of their rotation perfectly matched the rate at which a tiny dot in the sky was rising above the mountains of Afghanistan far to the Southwest. The dot, moving at 18,000 Miles per Hour rose swiftly on its long arc and the laws of physics inevitably brought it into a precisely calculated point, almost directly overhead. Sirens sounded, warning lights flashed...and history, was made.

Cosmos-1810 burned. Without warning, without notification or mercy, its surface temperature soared from a relatively warm fifteen degrees to over *eighteen hundred* in under two seconds as a hellish beam of coherent light from hundreds of kilometers away drilled mercilessly into its centre of mass, boiling away its thin sensitive antennas like tissue paper. Beleaguered, the satellite was granted *some* relief as the beam 'bloomed' and 'jittered', faults in the aiming systems and power flow causing the beam to briefly lose its lock as it drilled its way through the atmosphere, but even this partial lock was too little too late as the beam cut off, for the damage had been done. What had once been piece of high technology now looked like a work of modern art; the two massive solar panels mounted on the sides of the cylinder had lasted all of a second before –literally- being burned right off and the main body of the satellite, constructed of much sturdier aluminum and titanium, looked like it had been taken for a five second dip inside a vat of molten steel, the metal surface *still* rippling and running like water in Zero-G from the conducted heat it could not get rid of easily in a vacuum continued to cook it-

"Alright, hold it there".

The side-by-side visual and thermal images of Cosmos-1810 froze at the command, the lights in the amphitheater slowly rising at the same time. Whispered comments broke out for a few seconds among the nearly three hundred people in the room, but faded slowly to nothing as the man who had made the comment walked down to the front of the room to a lectern set underneath the twin projector screens that were showing what was still one of the best kept secrets of the Cold War.

"What you just saw was an obsolete Soviet Recon-Satellite being hit and destroyed by a sustained five second laser strike from a ground based installation code named 'Bright Star'" the man said without preamble or introduction as he stepped up to the lectern at the front of the room, tapping a button on a remote control as he settled into place. The two images on the screens vanished at once, and were replaced by twin wireframe diagrams. One, a 3D rendering a small installation on a mountainous peak rotated slowly to give the audience a good view of the entire facility, while the other screen showed a technical layout of a hexagon shaped building, six cylinders precisely set around a central column at sixty degree angles clearly visible even from where he was standing.

"And this is it" Colonel Allan Gregory (retired) added as he took in the hundreds of military and civilian personnel, from over thirty nations on Earth, all of whom now effectively worked for *him*. It was a rather terrifying thought when he stopped to think about it, so he *didn't*, and pushed on.

"Situated in what is now the Republic of Tajikistan" he continued, "Bright Star was the Russian counterpart to the US Strategic Defense Initiative system. The video you saw before was the first and only operational test of the system, before it was destroyed by a raiding party of Afghan Mujahidin a matter of months later".

At that, there was slight grumbling and shuffling from a large cluster of people in the room who were wearing the uniform of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, but they quickly settled down as Gregory directed a look at them.

"At any rate, although the USSR retained most of the key people and knowledge from the project, the collapse of the Soviet Union put any rebuilding plans on hold. When you combine this with the drawdown and then elimination of ICBM's from the US and Russia, it becomes somewhat understandable that the Russian Federation chose not to pursue the technology". Tapping another key, he switched the picture of the building and its six lasers to a split screen, with a picture of the laser directly under a wireframe diagram of its interior that had more than a few 'geeks' in the audience leaning forward in their seats. "This

is one of six free-electron lasers set into a combined sparse array that formed the heart of the Bright Star system. Each laser shoots its beam to a mirror outside the building and these mirrors in turn were responsible for aiming and focusing each beam directly onto its target. Theoretically, Bright Star could engage six targets at once this way, or focus all their firepower onto a single target. But as I'm sure you saw, they had a few problems".

"Blooming" an English professor from Cambridge put in at once, causing the sea of heads around him to nod in agreement...except for the front row, who's faces suggested that the scientist in question might as well have said 'Sunspots' or 'Klingons' for all the sense it made to them.

Well, that's why they're here after all, to learn, Gregory thought with mild amusement. He had spent God only knows how many wasted hours in front of Senate and Congressional committees explaining this science over and over to politicians who's only concern was how much of the money their state would get. It was one of life's great ironies that when that maniac Sato had crashed his 747 into the Capital building and wiped out two of the three branches of the US Government, he had taken out almost all the people most deeply in the back pockets of various special interest groups. The 'new breed' of Senators and Congressmen elected in countless special elections had proven remarkably resistant to the 'old way' of doing things, a resistance only enhanced by sweeping new laws that dramatically tightened campaign financing, lobbyist rules and President Ryans pleas during their elections to *not* send him a bunch of Career politicians. And the group in the front row, even if they *were* confused, were at least taking careful notes and *trying* to understand. And thankfully, NATO and the other countries that had sent political representatives had chosen people with *some* level of intelligence of what they were trying to do here...

It was quite a refreshing change for everyone involved really. Completely unnatural, but refreshing.

"You're quite right Professor" he continued, glancing down at the front row. "To explain for our guests; when you fire a laser as powerful as this through the atmosphere at a target in orbit, it has to

drill its way through the air in the way. The physics are a little complex, but suffice to say the beam gives up a certain amount of energy to the air, superheating it, a process that distorts and warps the beams focus and direction over a long distance. The problem with hitting a moving target in orbit is that you are continually having to 'drill' your way through the atmosphere and if you *can't* compensate for it, you end up with what us death ray geeks call 'thermal blooming' where the laser beam loses focus, and the energy delivered drops off dramatically. In the test you just watched, Bright Star was only able to deliver 'peak power' on target for the first few thousandths of a second before blooming kicked in as they tried to steer the beam to track the satellite".

"And that's why these types of facilities are placed so high up isn't it?" a Senator put in with a slight tilt of her head as she regarded the schematics on the screens. "Getting above that much of the troposphere eliminates the need to drill through most of the air, and reduces the effects of Thermal Blooming, doesn't it?"

A bunch of smart politicians who knew *too much* could be a dangerous thing for a runaway military industrial complex, such as the one that was threatening to explode with the need to radically 'up-tech' and rebuild the militaries of the world. But compared to the long *long* hours of trying to explain what he had been trying to do in the 1980's to Congressmen and Senators who's only concern was how much of Regan's pork this would bring them, it was a rather pleasant change.

"Precisely" he offered the Senator a pleased nod, before turning back to the screen. "Now as many people here know, the US was also developing its own laser defense system during the Cold War, code named Tea Clipper. And yes, I know, the Russians always came up with much cooler names" he admitted to light laughter around the room. A quick press of the remote switched the pictures of the Bright Star complex and lasers to a wireframe image of a similar mountaintop, this time in New Mexico. There were however far fewer buildings visible in this shot as while the USSR with their usual mania for secrecy had placed *everything* even remotely related to Bright Star in one easily guarded position, the 'business end' of the US system was made of nothing but the lasers, and built almost entirely

underground.

Gregory had never figured out of it was because someone thought the mountain might be subjected to a nuclear air burst some day and might need the protection, or if the designers had watched a little too much GI-Joe as kids and decided a top secret mountain base *had* to go underground.

"The biggest difference between Bright Star and Tea Clipper was in the fundamental way the lasers combined their power" he continued, switching the second screen from a schematic of Bright Stars lasers to one of Tea Clippers. "Where as Bright Star was essentially a sparse-laser array focusing each beam individually onto its target, Tea Clipper was a Phased Array Laser – and the first person to call it a 'Phaser' gets my boot in his ass" he broke off for a second with a mock glare, that again drew a chuckle from the room –except the Germans; they *never* laughed- before he turned back. "We chained five one-Megajoule lasers together, each of which focused its energy into a single large mirror fifty meters away. The mirror then brought all the beams into perfectly coherent phase, and shot the combined beam off at its target which, as I'll show you, could be a rather long distance away".

Yet another remote click had the second screen come on, showing a sphere representing Earth. A red beam streaked up from the left hand side, hit a space shuttle of highly exaggerated size sitting in orbit, which bounced the beam across to a distant orbiting satellite and from there down back to Earth, the beam having been sent all the way around the world, getting a few whistles and muttered comments of approval from some of the people in the room.

"Adaptive Optics" one of the Russians said in quite good English, the tone of his voice a mixture of annoyance and envy that made Allan grin slightly as he nodded.

"You got it. Tea Clipper's major difference was in the optics. We were able to send our beam from the ground station to what would have been an array of orbital mirrors. Each mirror in the chain is controlled by thousands of tiny actuators that let us precisely 'warp' the reflective surface by computer control, letting each stage

compensate for thermal blooming *and* let us hit any point on the planet from one ground station. The system also cycled as a rapid series of laser pulses rather than a constant beam, at a rate of twenty times per second. Each pulse was prefaced by a low energy pulse, just enough to let the computers work out the blooming distortion factor and compensate before the main pulse was fired. Our long term goal was to replace the one-Megajoule lasers with five-Megajoule lasers, twenty of them in fact. That would give us a one-hundred Megajoule beam to play with. Assuming we stayed with twenty bursts per second, we would be achieving an on-target energy transfer comparable to between twenty and thirty kilograms of high explosives, *complete* overkill for taking out an ICBM or SLBM".

It sounded so simple when put like that. How the various mirrors *themselves* were able to compensate for the atmospheric distortion and bounce a laser beam halfway across the globe with no loss of lethality...but it had taken him six different breakthroughs in laser optics and computer control, two billion dollars over five years and several Cray-2 Computers to make it work.

That it had also made *him* so valuable that the Chairman of the KGB had organized his kidnapping was something he tried not to think about. After all, if not for the FBI Hostage Rescue Team, he would have been 'vanished' him into Russia and probably brainwashed into working for Bright Star. And now, those same people were in the room ready to work with him on another space based laser system, and he was their boss!
Fate could be really funny sometimes...

"So why didn't the system work?" a Congressman sitting in the front row asked, his tone rather amused and strongly suggesting he knew there was a shoe about to drop down. The Whispered comments came to a halt as everyone turned to face the person in the front row who had interrupted. "Tea Clipper was shut down in Ninety One. What was the problem we couldn't get past?"

"In simple terms?" the Congressman gave a smirk at that, but nodded and Gregory crossed his arms, leaning back against the front of the Lectern as he considered his answers, and how to distill many *many* frustrating years of failure into a few sentences, pausing a few

seconds to make sure he got this right. Congressman Trent was arguably the most powerful man in Washington after you took away the people in the White House, one of the *very* few 'old school' Congressmen to survive Sato and his 747. He literally controlled the purse strings, and given that US was going to be providing just over half the funding for this project and Trent was a close friend of President Ryan, things would go a *lot* easier with him backing the team.

"In essence, both we and the Russians ran into the same problem; the damn lasers just didn't scale up the way we needed them to. That test of Bright Star you just saw? When they defrosted the lasers and inspected them they found that the optical coating on two of the six lasers had been fried. They *did* have the raw power, more than we ever got to, but they never went further and we never got that far, *because* the optical coatings we could build in the 1980's simply could not handle the energy levels needed".

"You're telling me that the lasers couldn't handle the energy fed into them?" Trent asked with a raised eyebrow, smoothly taking charge of the briefing with the ease only a politician of his experience could. "

"In effect, yes" Gregory shrugged helplessly. "The optical coatings we and the Russians used, generally copper or molybdenum, couldn't handle the heat. Our mirrors *could*, but a mirror is much easier to mount a sophisticated cooling system on the back of. The guts of the lasers, especially where they got hot...well, even supercooled before firing they just couldn't transfer the heat away fast enough and cooked themselves, even when we tuned them to the best possible wavelengths".

"And I'm guessing that explains the *fiasco* down at White Sands as well?"

Allan Gregory winced slightly at that. Barely three *weeks* after the Pirates had been driven off, General Alexander Miller had decided to leap wildly into a full scale power test of a laser system jury rigged with glue and duct tape, based around a salvaged Medium-Weight laser from one of the Battlemechs blown up in New Zealand.

The results had not precisely been what the US Government would have wanted. With the critical 'guts' of one of the two prototype YAL-1 Airborne Lasers turned into molten slag just under one Billion dollars of write off, one Inner Sphere medium laser –the only one the NZ Government had given the US- damaged from the high wattage pulse put through it, one political eruption from various nations all over Earth at the unannounced test, one inter-service shit storm from the USAF at the US Army moving into the Strategic missile defence game, when their expertise and equipment was all about the Tactical game, to say nothing of their 'borrowed' ABL systems being turned into a few hundred dollars of scrap metal.

A surprisingly large number of politicians had howling for Millers ass to be put in Leavenworth for such a spectacular waste of taxpayers' money, or at worst, stationed to the most miserable command the US military had to offer, preferably in Northern Alaska. General Mickey More, Chief of Staff of the Army and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs on the other hand had been more inclined to give him a medal, less Gregory thought for the success of the test then for making the Air Force Chief of Staff's face go such an interesting shade of red. In the end, it had taken the involvement of the SecDef to sort the mess out – and when Bretano stepped into –or onto- a situation, he *ended* it, *no-one* screwed around with him when he made a decision.

Annoyingly, given that he was just about ready to take a long *long* vacation, the decision made had been to put *him* in charge without so much as bothering to ask. He was starting to get a little sick of Bretano, his old boss at TRW, pulling him out of the office and into Government service whenever he felt like it, but when the President of the United States called and asked you to take the job, well, you really didn't have a choice in the matter...especially when General More had made somewhat veiled threats about reactivating his commission if he didn't play ball. And so here he was, in charge of the best laser weapon specialists in the world –and his wife who had taken a job as a project leader on the laser development side of things which would make things rather interesting. And he had even managed to convince the President not to send General Miller to Alaska. The fact was that he *had* gotten an awful lot of useful data from the test, *and* it had served as a proof of concept test for the Adaptive Optics on the ABL system which would form a lot of the

basis for their development so, grudgingly, it had all been put to the side in the interests of progress.

Of course, Congressman Trent had never been the type to forgive and forget.

"Three points to make here Congressman" he said, carefully stepping around the White Sands incident. "First and *most* critical is that in a lot of ways, the lasers used in 'B-Tech' technology are the most insane mixture of nineteen seventies castoff tech, and thirty first century technology we barely understand the basics of, yet they are probably more reliable than an AK-47. The Inner Sphere has purportedly been blowing them out of mechs, then strapping them onto others for centuries, and from the looks of the Lasers we've had a look at, I'd believe it, they are built to last beyond anything I've seen before in a weapons system more complex than a sword. Now the trade off for all that is that they lack anything like the sophistication you'd expect of them, they are *only* good out to a matter of kilometres with the optics they have. Which is more than what you need in a Mech fight, but it really limits the system, sacrificing accuracy, focus, range and wattage to get this design".

Gregory paused to make sure that the front row was following, and was gratified to see they looked almost hooked and were still writing copious notes.

"Now, in the future - and in the past before their technological slide- the Inner Sphere managed to compensate for this by building dedicated laser variants such as the Pulse and Extended, at least if the Battletech sourcebooks are correct. But it's still almost impossible to believe that in hundreds of years they never built a real unified laser architecture, or overcame a lot of their efficiency issues. Their understanding of a lot of the fundamentals of lasers looks almost laughable, yet look at the results they can achieve? To put it in perspective, this" he fired the remote again and pointed at the picture of a laser that had just arrived at White Sands today and was being carefully taken apart by General Miller and his team, "is a standard Inner Sphere Large Laser, specifically a Diverse Optics Type 30. Combined with their Fusion reactors that provide power, this one laser is capable of putting out *just as much power as the entire Bright*

Star facility, a facility powered by one of the largest hydro-electric dams in the world, by the way".

He paused to let that sink in before continuing. An entire mountaintop complex just *barely* matched a Mech mounted laser. The 'confident' faces in the front row fell surprisingly fast to 'doom and gloom' as an understanding of just how far behind they were sunk in.

"The second point to make is that the Inner Sphere cracked the problem both we and the Soviets had with optical surfaces a longtime ago. Instead of using metal alloys, they in fact use a crystal coating, diamond in fact, made from pure Carbon-12. It can pass the waste heat they couldn't keep in the beam out from the laser *very* quickly into the heat-sink / heat-exchanger system on their Battlemechs, dumping all the waste heat into -"

"They use WHAT?" one Congressman demanded in shock as what Gregory had said caught up to him. "You're saying they use *diamonds* in their lasers?"

"*Artificial* diamond, Sir, not 'real' diamonds cut for jewelery" he explained carefully, fighting the rather strong urge to roll his eyes like half the room was behind the mans back. "In fact, we looked into the same process back in the 1980's, but we just couldn't work the material to how we wanted it back then. In the last few years I must point out however, we've made some great strides in the technology and quality control. With the sample lasers to work with, General Dynamics advanced projects lab is very confident we can duplicate the materials we need within three to four years, and then start limited real production within two years after that. Frankly, once we have the optical coatings problem sorted out, the rest is really child's play. Scaling the lasers *down* to ground forces is a whole different question of course, but not one we have to deal with".

The faces, now looked happy again.

Trent nodded slowly at the unbridled optimism in the man; he clearly *believed* everything he said. He would have usually rolled his eyes at

such a display of enthusiasm as nothing more than a dog and pony show for the benefit of getting him to open Uncle Sam's chequebook, but both Tony Bretano and President Ryan himself, two men he called friends and trusted, had told him *very* good things about this Geek of a kid, most of which were still rather highly classified. More than anyone else, he had been the brains behind the Tea Clipper project, advancing the US's laser technology a year for every *month* he had spent on the project and even though they had run into the optical coatings roadblock, which had hardly been *his* fault. Snapped up by the Private sector within hours of his Army contract expiring, he had moved up the ranks at TRW and become the youngest Vice President in the company's history; a natural at coming up with all manner of better ways for the US Military to blow shit up.

He had, however, needed to be dragged kicking and screaming back into Government service when his old boss Bretano had called him in, but Trent had thanked God many many times today after he had been briefed, that he *had* been pulled back in. What was still *very* classified in the man's file was that he had been the one who had jury rigged the AEGIS / SM2 combination system into a somewhat workable Anti-Ballistic missile system, one that had stopped the Chinese ICBM last year from turning Washington into a Five Megaton parking lot. The man was a hero, there was no doubt about that, but he had all but demanded to stay out of the limelight, almost the anti-politician really.

He had been called back shortly after the first Battletech invasion of New Zealand, and again he had been right in the centre of things; turning the SM2 missile into an effective hit-to-kill weapon for use against Battletech Aerofighter and Dropship targets, in addition to consulting heavily on the crash program that had put the first orbital missile batteries into orbit. Simply put, the man was probably the smartest weapons designer in the history of Earth. All day, he had been hearing many of the people in this room –at least those under the age of twenty five- calling him the 'real Tony Stark'...and while he didn't have the first clue what that meant, the awe on everyone's face when he had walked into the room had been clear enough.

"An impressive presentation Doctor Gregory" Trent spoke up again, once more getting all attention in the room back on him as he leaned

forward slightly. "But what kind of a time frame and budget are we looking at here?"

"We're looking at a three phase process" Gregory replied, walking back to his lectern and opening up a folder and studying the paperwork inside, the sound of hundreds of other folders being opened at the same time sounding through the packed room. "Out Russian team led by Professor Morozov" Gregory said, pointing at a man in the third row in the middle of the Russian officers, who waved back and acknowledged his nod with one of his own, "are taking the lead on developing the lasers themselves, they have a *lot* of ideas on this, but we're still looking at a ten to fifteen year time frame before we can build lasers the size and power we want for our final system design. The design specs are for lasers about four times the size and output of an Inner Sphere ER large laser, with sixteen of them mounted in a phase-array firing as one to an orbital mirror grid and a system cycle time of around two seconds per pulse. As we are building this as a major ground based facility, heat dissipation which is the biggest issue, shouldn't be any problem, but we have one major issue".

"Power" Trent guessed, getting a slight nod from Gregory, who looked rather pleased that he had picked the issue that was vexing them all so much.

"Exactly. Power *will* be a major limiting factor until we can get our own fusion reactors online, but we can get away with salvaging a half dozen Inner Sphere fusion reactors from the mechs we've got scattered around and make do for now. If we can get our hands on sixteen Inner Sphere large lasers over the next few years, we might just be able to build the installation and validate the architecture to a functional weapons system within ten years; albeit highly dependent on components we can't build as yet. In parallel, we'll be working on combining out Adaptive Optics technology with Inner Sphere materials science, and looking to putting a full laser-mirror network in orbit over the next six to eight years. Once *that* is in play, we can start system tests".

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, in fifteen years, if a hostile dropship arrives in system, once it reaches about Luna Orbit, we melt the fucker right out of the sky".

originally written by Chris O'Farrell

"- senate has passed the forth piece of military legislation in as many weeks, fast tracking critical funding to provide the logistical support for the new Global Defense Initiative. The House and Senate bills are all but identical with some minor differences that are expected to be ironed out within two days, and then passed to President Ryan for his signature. The White House issued a statement congratulating both chambers on moving so quickly - but carefully - on the legislation, meaning US funding can start rolling immediately with a supplementary bill until the next financial year. To explain this in greater depth, we are now going live to-"

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"-received the Hero of the Russian Federation medal in a ceremony at the Kremlin earlier today, his third such award from his long and distinguished career in the service to the Soviet Union and Russian Federation . General Bondarenkos short and sharp action has been pointed to by military commentators as a textbook example of using Earths assets to their best effect against enemy 'Mech formations, though some have criticized the use of three divisional sized artillery formations as excessive force against a single Pirate company, claiming that there is evidence the pirates may have been attempting to surrender after the first barrage landed on top of - and crippled - their Drop Ship, however the Russian Government has denied these accusations saying, quote, 'We offered the Pirates the exact same quarter they offered us', end quote. Widely known in military circles as the brilliant theater commander of Russian and NATO troops during the short but intense war between the Russian Federation and Peoples Republic of China last year, exclusive CNN insiders suggest that the General is on the short list of officers to head up the newly created Global Defense Initiative-"

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"-Arts has come to an agreement to not launch any legal action over use of the term 'Global Defense Initiative' and any such trademarked material, granting free license to the United Nations at no charge. EA-Pacific CEO Louis Castle announced that he was very pleased with the outcome of the talks with the UN. He denied any knowledge of rumors that the UN was working on a new tank design combining the best of human and alien technology named the 'Mammoth Tank', but he did confirm that Joseph Kucan will be attending the ground breaking ceremony for GDI Headquarters in Geneva later this month, where he will dedicated the building in the name of the Brotherhood of Nod. In related news-

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"-are completely missing the point! These people are not just statistics, we are talking about billions of humans across known space, stuck in anything from a neo-feudal Japan where slavery is completely legal and there are *no* legal rights for their citizens, to a war mad ruler who honestly thinks that it is his or his children's destiny to rule the Inner Sphere and started a war on the day of his bloody *wedding* as much for revenge as ultimately because he wanted to control the entire Inner Sphere, who's kids will then start a civil war in the *best* traditions of the Tudors and Windsors-

"You're completely misrepresenting the situation *again*, the Federated Commonwealth is the best hope for stability in the Inner Sphere, which we want to work *with* to change for the better, not shatter and try to rebuild on our own, the kind of hubris that takes to think we can walk into the Inner Sphere like a God Damned bulldozer and simply change centuries of the 'way' things work with saturation nuclear bombardments is not just morally reprehensible, but-

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"So...to make sure I've got this right, you're telling me that you were abducted by aliens".

"You're damn right Jerry, though at the time, I thought they were's funny looken critters with big heads and claws and stuff. But after I saw those them pictures of those molecule thingies-"

"Elementals?"

"Yeah thats them, when I saws them, I knew they were what took me and the pickup truck! Those Clan fellas are already here! And the damn ATF wants to take away by missile launcher, we need them to defend ourselves, those Feds sons of bitches!"

"Alright. And what they did these people do after abducting you?"

"Wells, I was on this there spaceship see. And they put me down on this cold table, and started to shove this long metal rod up my-"

CLICK

"Cartman, you're so fat that when Assault Mechs walk down the street they all stop and say God DAMNIT, there, that's a *big fat ass!*-"

Click

"-Troika have praised the sacrifices of all those who died defense of Mecca, vowing that the lives lost will never be forgotten so long as it stands. Indeed the Saudi Minister for the Hajh was present for the prayer service and, jointly, announced the construction of a great monument outside the city today, to be built by the finest masons in the Middle East. From what I understand John, it will be a ring of individual monuments evenly placed around the city, each monument made up of a life sized replica of the Battlmechs and Vehicles of the Free Azami Army, all facing out in an eternal guard. In addition, there will be a long wall down the middle of the highway

that leads into the city, along which all pilgrims walk past during the Hajj, which will apparently be inscribed with the name of every soldier from every nation, who gave their life in defense of the city, the 'Angels sent by Allah to defend his people in their greatest hour', as put by the Minister-"

Click

"-lawsuit against Harmony Gold. Microsoft, who just last week finalized their complete buyout of the entire Intellectual Property line beyond their initial stake of the FASA organization, is entirely confident of a quick victory against the Japanese Company for intellectual property violation with their just announced line of Warhammer and Phoenix Hawk model sets. Bill Gates was unavailable for comment, but renowned legal expert Judith Sheindlin has been quoted as saying 'those poor SOB's' when told Microsoft's legal team was on its way to Japan-"

Click

"So this planet called 'Helm', you think that GDI should make it their first strategic priority?"

"Absolutely Kent. The source material is emphatically clear and has been right on the money so far; this planet contains a divisional sized force of Battletech hardware from the Star League just ripe for the taking. And even more critical than that, it also houses an intact Star League era memory core, the importance of which cannot be overstated. We are talking about scientific data, engineering data, design schematics, more or less the entire sum of the next *seven hundred years* of human progress! So yes, I will be introducing a motion into the Senate tomorrow to call on the President to push GDI to make recovery of this cache our first priority".

"But Senator, the source material also makes it clear that this Star League era memory core was critical in stating the Inner Sphere back

down the road to recovery, to the point that they were able to fight the Clans during-"

"And our very presence will change all this. Kent, the fact is that *we* need that technology if *we* are going to survive. I daresay we will even be in a better position to make use of it in many ways than the Inner Sphere, and we *can* still work at disseminating the cores information back to the Inner Sphere if we need to, or just manufacture the advanced technology and *sell* it to them in time for the Clan Invasion, but the bottom line is that we *know* where it is, and we damn well better go and get it-"

Click.

And with that, the TV shut itself off, leaving Mary Pat Foley glaring at it as she yet again wondered how in the hell her life and world had become so insane, so quickly.

It had been bad enough over the last few years, with some of the more topsy-turvy events, from Japan declaring war against the United States to Iran launching a Bioweapon attack on her county, to fighting *with* the Russians in defense of their homeland...but at least those were events eminently logical insomuch as events on Earth were concerned.

But she drew the line as table-top board games coming to life and stomping around her planet.

As head of the CIA however, it was her job to get the information her Government, and now also the Governments of the world, needed to make their decisions...but she wasn't used to the average person in the public having just about as much information to work with as she did. Well, not officially anyway. But having her younger son briefing both her and her husband on Battletech when they had finally gotten home, was an entirely new experience for the Foleys.

Perversely, he had done a far better job at it than the people at CIA paid to do it, correctly guessing that his parents were far more

interested in their opposites among the Inner Sphere then some junior grade geek stammering through how cool a Naval Laser 55 battery was.

Shaking her head, she stood and stretched, glancing at the clock and noting the time as she did so, walking to the window of her office and looking down across the broad expanse of Langley and the woods around the CIA's headquarters, before turning back to take in her office. Her job was far more than 'Battletech' of course, despite the crazy events of the last few months there were things on Earth she had to keep an eye on, but compared to even ten years ago, it was a completely different ballgame this year. The Russians were Capitalists, members of NATO and thanks to the resource fields in Eastern Siberia, increasingly looking like they were going to make this century one to look back on proudly. Japan was, for one, getting strong leadership and with the so-called 'Great Ones' mostly dead at the hands of AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, the people of Japan were for once actually in control of their own country, which was a nice change. The Middle East was still busy hugging each other *without* C4 strapped to their chests, China was busy reforming itself and working hard on restarting its economy while India had thrown its previous PM into jail, once the truth of how she planned to ally with the Tamil Tigers in an invasion of Sri-Lanka had come out...thanks to the CIA.

She had never seen a democratic government pass a motion of no-confidence that fast before.

Everything had been relatively calm and nice, just for once! And then a bunch of *pirates* in *Mechs* had come stomping through with a bad attitude and screwed up the holiday she had damn well earned!

Sighing, she walked back to her desk in the rather well appointed office as the intercom buzzed. Covered in a mixture of analyst reports and Battletech Field Manuals covered in hundreds of 'post-it' notes, she had to hunt for a while to find her phone, and press the flashing light.

"Yes?"

"Hey Hon" her Husband and the DCI spoke up through the tiny speaker, bringing a tired smile to her face as she fell back into her

chair. "How's it going?"

"Super" she drawled out. "I've got thirty candidates who know almost nothing about Battletech down at the farm who have signed up for the project. They're in isolation, we don't have to worry about contamination from the fucking seven o'clock news, and our best people are working to get them ready".

"Good to hear" Ed said, correctly guessing his Wifes mood and correctly guessing he should shut up and not make any unnecessary comments. Putting together a cadre of their best people for long term operations inside the Inner Sphere was her major project right now, and long term, perhaps the most critical for Earth over the next decade, but it didn't help that every operation they were thinking about putting together was being *debated on CNN* if she just turned on the TV! The group they had put together had therefore needed to be painstakingly 'scrubbed' of anyone who had seen anything or knew anything beyond the very basics anyone in the Inner Sphere might know. At 'The Farm', they would be trained with the best people they had, with as much hands on experience from salvaged Battletech technology and knowledge as they could be, before being taken apart for their individual or group missions, compartmentalizing each group from the other.

And the fact that the media was blasting everything from the upcoming 4th Succession War to the Clan Invasion and Word of Blake Jihad as talking points on every news network, made finding the people they needed rather difficult.

But bitching to her Husband about it wouldn't do anything but make him try to avoid her for the rest of the day. And as he was technically her boss, it would doing their jobs rather difficult...not to mention put paid to any romantic evening plans they had tonight.

"Anyway, I thought you'd like to know, everyone is assembling in the conference room, I'm heading down there now if you're ready?"

"I'm on my way" she confirmed with a sigh, taking a final gulp of the coffee on her desk and wincing at the tepid temperature before she headed out. As always, she paused to make sure her office door

locked behind her and walked briskly to the elevator, working briefly to clean up her appearance somewhat on the way. Ed, as well as the DDCI and DDO were waiting at the executive elevator, a brief exchange of nods and the four most powerful people at the Central Intelligence Agency descended down three levels and took a short walk along the edge of the building overlooking the highly unclassified car park, and from there into a well appointed conference room guarded by a pair of plain clothes police officers, who opened the door for them with aplomb as they approached, and closed them behind, re-establishing the electronic countermeasures seal around the room.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch!" Mary called out as she walked in. The man in question turned and a broad smile passed across his face as he headed over towards her.

"Maria Foleyeva!" the Russian head of the SVR boomed back, the man kissing both cheeks Russian style, and Mary flinching American style as they got together. Ed shot her an amused look and made a beeline for where Sir Basil Charleston, the head of the British SIS was chatting away with Avi Ben Jakob, the head of the Mossad, Israel's intelligence organization, whose tiny size belayed its incredible ability to worm its way through countless places across the world it shouldn't be. "These are most interesting times to be in our profession, are they not?"

"I'd settle for a nice quiet break to be honest Sergey" she sourly replied, speaking in Russian as she always did when talking with the very senior advisor to President Grushavoy. His English was good enough, but she had learned her Russian at the feet of her Grandfather from the age of two and spoke with a polished elegance that she enjoyed practicing when she had the chance. "We have enough problems on *this* planet without taking on a few *thousand* more".

"Covering our eyes and hoping the rest of the universe will go away will not help us when a Clan Galaxy falls on our heads, nyet?" Golovko pointed out in an amused voice".

"And our job is to make sure that doesn't happen" Ed spoke up in a

slightly louder voice, getting the attention of everyone across the windowless room. "So I'd suggest we get started".

Swiftly the people in the room took their assigned places. The large oval shaped table had places set for thirty people, comprising representatives from the GDI nations, as well as their staffs sitting along the walls behind them, with a lectern at the very front of the table that Ed moved to stand behind. Most of the people in the room were *very* senior people in the 'spook' game, many of whom had been fighting 'shadow-wars' against each other for a long time, depending on who was pissed and who was paranoid at any one particular time, but they were all *professionals*, for whom the business was always that and not personal, meaning working together was actually far easier for them than some of their political masters were finding it to be.

They were all spies, but they lived by a code of honour and 'rules' that while unwritten, were as real and immutable as the Constitution of the United States, and that more than anything, brought them together today.

"Okay, let's get to it. As we all know, the GDI treaty which is due to be signed and ratified in a short time makes distinct provisions for a unified intelligence department for co-ordination and collaboration of intelligence activities in the defence of Earth. Now everyone here knows what we're up against, and we've all been liaising for several months towards this meeting, but I hope this week we'll be able to hammer out a number of major operation frameworks to go forward with and present to the GDI Leadership. If you'll all open your briefing folders" and there was the expected pause as all the spooks broke the seals on the folders in front of them or under their chairs, "you'll see that our preliminary working group has divided our efforts and workload around several major components. These are in no particular order; intelligence gathering, asset recovery, strategic 'shaping' of the geopolitical and military situation inside the Inner Sphere, and finally, counter-intelligence and infiltration of our 'cousins' out there".

Ed paused for a few seconds to make sure everyone was with him before offering a grim smile. "Suffice to say, if the various Intelligence agencies in the Inner Sphere *really* work as all the source material

we've studied shows, well..." he let the thought trail off, but there was a consensus of looks from around the room at just how horribly outclassed the Inner Sphere was on this playing field, and how much wonderful *fun* this was going to be if all the source book material really *was* the truth of how things were done in the wider Galaxy.

"*But*" he hastened to add before anyone thought he was being an idiot and making the cardinal sin of all sins in their business, "we won't *assume* anything of the sort".

None of them would dare make such an assumption. The way the intelligence services of Loki, MIIIO, ISF, SAFE, ROM and the Maskirovka worked, if the fluff could be believed, defied description and logic, as if the Great Houses had just hired a bunch of people off the street who had read one spy novel too many and been told to make an intelligence service using the aforementioned books as a guide. Some of the staggering, clumsy, unwieldy and downright idiotic mistakes made by these groups had given most of these people around the table reactions from outright laughter to downright fear at the possibility that a spook could really be *that* stupid.

Which had rather quickly led to everyone deciding that no, no-one *could* be that stupid and all this material was a double blind, a trap of whatever being or process had brought Earth into this universe in the first place, as if they were simply being toyed with, or even more frighteningly, that this universe *had* been created by the authors and writers on Earth, and some power had spun it from them somehow, for some reason. In which case of course, things could change rather quickly.

Followed by a just as quick conversion 'back' when the exhaustive interrogations and 'debriefings' of the many Mercs, Pirates and Civilians from the second invasion had been collated and compared, and shown terrifyingly consistent facts, attitudes and beliefs of the insane neo-feudal society that had for hundreds of years been dominated by an odd desire to continue an unwinnable series of wars for the sake of those wars.

That their work had also uncovered four possible and two probable Spooks mixed in with the bunch was hardly surprising, given that keeping an eye on the rather unsavory group of Pirates infesting the periphery of the inhabited Galaxy was a goal of some worth. The first

agent, who just *reeked* of ISF from his debriefs, was even now happily winging his way to Tokyo where the PSI was very interested to see how the man would respond to a face to face with the Emperor, where the PSI might or might not tip their hand, depending on how they went. The second Agent, who was the subject of fierce betting over if she was MIIO or ROM, was being very carefully held in a military base as a 'free' prisoner, being presented with all manner of Battletech information, to see how she handled it. Mary-Pat had put her best people on the case as the handlers to see how she reacted to the information being slowly fed to her.

But none the less, despite all the information they now had, *none* of the very senior Spooks here would ever do something as catastrophically arrogant as 'assuming' that their opposite numbers in the Inner Sphere were NOT up to their standards, or even better, at this game. Spies who made such assumptions generally *didn't* live to the average age of the people around this table. And as in this scenario the agents they would be putting in the field wouldn't have any of the niceties of diplomatic covers, stuck months away from safety even *if* they had a jump ship handy to get to them, they owed it to those people to be *damn* careful and get it right the first time.

A fact which unerringly had led to Antallos. Irrespective of any other reason for taking the planet in their minds; the Intelligence world needed to *prove* they could infiltrate and operate on an Inner Sphere planet undetected, as their first step to *real* operations inside the Inner Sphere itself.

Because if they screwed this up, they didn't have a chance against their *real* enemy. And speaking of them...

"With that said, I'm going to turn this over to Bas" Ed said, nodding to Sir Basil who stood and made his way easily to the abandoned lectern, and glanced down his peers with a look that was not grim, but serious enough to get everyone's complete attention as he opened his own notes.

"Ladies, Gentlemen. Our working group has unanimously identified the greatest threat to Earth, and the wider Inner Sphere that we will need to deal with before it deals with us. To understand this threat and make sure we are all on the same page however, we will take a

short detour back to where it all started, with a mid-level technician in the service of the Star League, named Jerome Blake..."

Mecca
Saudi Arabia
Earth
March 12, 2006

Hajji Aladdin Al Azim smiled as he watched the sun set over the holy city. God's will was truly incomprehensible at times, but he had few regrets and no complaints. Had he been told the year before that the next he would be standing on a private penthouse, eating dates and drinking sparkling mineral water while watching the sun set over Mecca, he'd he'd have considered that person to be mad.

He smiled as he popped another ripe, flavorful fruit into his mouth. He would never take anything for granted ever again, because he was truly most blessed. It saddened him that many of his men did not survive the battle, but he felt no sadness about their deaths. They gave their lives to protect the faithful, to protect the innocent, to protect the most holy of places. They died well and for the greatest of causes, and he would forever thank them for their sacrifice. His only regret was that they were gone while he was here indulging in these pleasures.

After the battle his men had been gifted with suites in an apartment building overlooking the Great Mosque, and the government of Saudi Arabia was building for them a base in the deserts outside Mecca, that the Free Azami Army may forever stand vigilant over the city. His people and he were called the Heroes of Islam, the Avenging Angels come down from heaven to protect the faithful. It was as moving as it was inaccurate. They were men, not angels, and he could never let their adoration blind him to his own human fallibility.

Still though, he would fight and die without hesitation to protect the city, to protect this world that was now his home. While he would never stop until the Azami Brotherhood was free of the Dragon's

coils, his top priority was protecting this holy world and its people. He'd already become intoxicated by the spirit of freedom that abounded on this world. Truly Democracy was what Allah wished for his people, for them to be free and equal under his infinite grace. While Arabia wasn't democratic, its new king was working to bring freedom and prosperity to the people of the prophets homeland.

All men created equal under God and must be held equally accountable to the laws of both God and Man. That was the true nature of things. He believed things finally made sense. The American Christian, Jefferson, had been right. It was self-evident, all men were created equally and gifted with rights by the hand of Allah himself that could never be taken away by a mortal king. By Allah's own hand humanity had been give the right to live their lives in a manner that allowed them to be free, happy, and prosperous. Such was His infinite benevolence, and love for his people.

This realization uplifted him, but at the same time it gave him a terrible, burning rage. His people in the Combine were not only denied the right to worship God, but their Rights as mandated by Merciful Allah as well. "The Dragon" was listed in the holy book of the prophet Jesus as one of the many names of Satan, and the Draconis Combine was truly of force of darkness upon the universe.

Aladdin was interrupted from his musing by a rap on the door. Slowly he stood from his lounge chair and walked to the door. Opening it he smiled.

Before him stood the King of Saudi Arabia, the most kust and clever King Ali who he was proud to call his friend.

"Hello, Moinuddin," the king said with a thin smile upon his face.

Aladdin flushed slightly. He was a humble man and still not used to

the praise of others. This made Ali laugh.

"You are too modest, but it suits you. You are a great hero and you and your men shall be remembered for all time as among the greatest of us."

Aladdin smiled slightly. He was a simple warrior and scholar who did what any man would do, but it was unfitting to argue with a king. "Is there something I may do for you, oh king?" He asked.

"I have come to see how you are doing," he replied.

"The doctor says that I am fit for duty, and most of my men are well onto the road to full recovery. Those who are able should be fit for battle by summer."

Ali nodded. "Your Captain Ibrahim is overseeing the construction of your base."

Aladdin suppressed a slight wince. Jane was a good woman, but to say she was not traditional was an understatement. Personally he felt that the woman was quite possibly mad, but as a fighter pilot that was to be expected. Still, he cared for her as if she were his own father's daughter. "I hope she is not giving your men too much trouble."

The king laughed. "There have been a dozen complaints in the last three days about the 'devil woman'. I have been ignoring them. She is as much a hero as any man. She may be as difficult as she wishes."

Aladdin smiled in amusement, but his mind was running swiftly. A king does not visit even a hero, especially unannounced, without

good cause. "Is there something I may do for you?"

"Yes," He replied honestly. "I have been told you are unmarried?"

"Yes, that is true. I have never had the opportunity to have a family."

"Then I wish to offer you the hand of my younger sister, Fatima. She is kind and beautiful, and I believe you would be a good match."

Aladdin sighed and slowly shook his head. "I am moved by the offer, but I believe that it is Allah's will that we marry for love and not a political arrangement. I would be happy to meet with your sister, but under the condition that she is not forced to marry against her wishes."

Ali nodded. "Very well then, Allamah," he said, causing Aladdin to flush with the praise once again, "Then I only ask that you meet her and allow love to have a fair chance."

Aladdin nodded. "Very well, good king. I shall meet your sister and we shall determine if we wish to court."

"Superb! How about I introduce you right now?"

Alladin blushed and stepped back almost in horror. He was clad in but a simple cotton dressing gown and slippers, he was unkept and carrying an unsavory odor as he'd lazed in taking a bathing this morning, instead planning to take it instead after mid-day prayer! He was in no condition to meet a princess! He would look like a fool, like a brute!

Ali simply laughed at his reaction. "My friend, you are simply too easy. I have no intention of being so impulsive about it. When you are ready, visit the palace and you shall be my honored guest."

Alladin relaxed. "You are a very cruel man."

Ali laughed. "No, you are just easy to jest. Even if you were not a hero, I would be happy to call you friend and proud to introduce you to my sister. You are a truly good man." He sighed and continued, "Now, I do have one other piece of business. I wish to speak with you about the plans of the Global Defense Initiative..."

Any University
Any First or Second World country
Earth
Any day in 2006

"Professor, I've got it! I know what hyperspace is and how to achieve FTL jumps! Here, look at this."

"Indeed? Let me see that, young man. Hmm... interesting..."

"As you can see, Professor, what BT calls 'hyperspace' is what we call the Quantum Sea. Well, I know the Quantum Sea was only a theoretical construct before, but the raw data from the fusion engine tests seem to confirm it. See, the Quantum Sea theory says that the visible, macroscopic universe is really patterns made up of standing waves of virtual particles that unlike most virtual particles don't constantly appear and vanish. What BT does is manipulate those patterns to move them from point A to point B. And this math – which incidentally I worked out myself – describes exactly how they do it!"

"Yes, yes, very good. It looks like you came up with an interesting variation of Theory Seven."

"Yeah! Uh... what?"

"Young man, there are literally thousands of brilliant men and women all over the world working on the Faster Than Light problem. Each and every one of them has proposed possible solutions and theoretical models. So far, most of their hypotheses have been disproven. The ones that remain tend to fall in *twelve* broad categories, each and every one of which needs to be tested with equipment that either no one has, or is being used for other non-science purposes. Yours just happens to fall under Theory Seven."

"Oh... sorry for wasting your time, Professor."

"Don't be sorry. The world needs brilliant young people like yourself. That you managed to work out the math on your own says great

things about your intelligence."

"If you say so, Professor. I guess I'll see you in class. Bye."

"Goodbye. Poor fellow..."

"Professor!"

"Yes? Can I help you, young lady?"

"I know how FTL works! Look! I even worked out the math!"

"Sigh..."

Groom Lake Testing Facility
Nevada
Earth
9 March 2006

The modified *Leopard* class Dropship flew in low, so low that it had to rise slightly to clear the mountains surrounding its objective. Below on the ground, the semi-permanent camp of observers noted the Dropship's presence and obligingly took photographs and video of its passage. Once upon a time, those people would have been regarded as lunatic conspiracy theorists looking for proof of aliens. These days, the aliens were proven if human, but a few UFO hunters remained, joined by even more people interested in seeing what the military was doing with all the new technology at the so-called "secret" base.

The people on the *Leopard* paid them no mind. In fact, they didn't even realize that they were there. But if they had, their egos might have been pumped up enough to do some fancy flying and give the ground bound civilians a show. As it was, the pilot put the Dropship into a holding pattern, circling low above the base.

In one of the *Leopard's* former Aerospace Fighter bay, a small crew checked and double checked their instruments and confirmed that they were indeed looking at their designated target for today's test. A request was sent to the pilot to adjust the *Leopard's* holding pattern, bringing the target to the circle's rough center. More minutes passed as Ground Control made sure the target zone was clear of any live human beings.

While the *Leopard* crew waited, they studied the target. It was a misshapen lump, a 200 plus ton block of metal that had resulted in a failed first attempt at mass producing BT style armor. But for all that, it was still tough enough to withstand the today's weapons testing.

When the all clear was given, two of the *Leopard's* mech bay doors slid smoothly open. Only it was not mechs that were revealed, but the muzzles of many, many guns.

Eight of the new Variable Autocannons fired as one, raining enough

depleted uranium shells to instantly strip even the most heavily armored battlemechs of their frontal armor. But this was an accuracy test, not a firepower test. At their highest rate of fire, the VACs could have instantly smeared any mere battlemech across the landscape.

But the VACs were not alone. Six 155mm howitzers added their high explosive shells into the mix, obscuring the target behind fireballs and smoke and shards of flying debris. Like their more rapid fire cousins, the howitzers had been fitted with autoloading systems to maximize their rate of fire.

Even as they pummeled the target with shells and fire, a captured pirate LRM carrier unloaded its full firepower on the intruding Dropship. Or it would have been its full firepower had the long range missiles it fired still possessed an explosive payload. But this was only a test, and the missiles still possessed their full flight capability, racing towards the *Leopard* to inflict simulated harm. Only the LRMs began dying in droves as the four modified Phalanx CIWS spewed out a wall of metal for them to run into. Forty two missiles died short of their goal. The majority of the surviving LRMs only lived because they were off target and missed not only the Phalanx fire, but the Dropship as well. Only three LRMs actually hit the Dropship on the underside of its wing, and the damage inflicted by them had they been armed would have been laughable.

Testing complete, the Leopard closed its bay doors, and turned to go home. Below, scientists and engineers swarmed onto the testing field to examine the much reduced lump of armor.

Supply Center

Fort Polk

Louisiana

Earth

2 April 2006

"Alright, Captain, here's the shipping manifest," the civilian contractor said, handing the officer a clipboard with a small stack of forms on it. "All the new point eight BT standard armor you need to upgrade your tanks."

"About bloody time," the Brit tank company commander replied, taking the clipboard and flipping through its papers. "I was beginning to think we wouldn't get these in time."

It bothered the civilian slightly that some foreigner was in charge of any American units. Of course, they technically weren't *American* units and never had been. They were technically newly formed GDI units that incorporated personnel at all levels from GDI member countries. But they were based at an American base on American soil, so that made them American units dammit!

"Yeah, I heard you were putting tanks on the train in a week or so," the civilian said, letting no hints of his thoughts out. "I used to be a tanker once, so I gotta ask. How are you guys going to get all that armor on in time?"

"Oh, that's no secret," the Brit said without looking up from the clipboard. "We're equipped with Israeli designed Merkavas. The Israelis originally designed their tanks with modular armor in order to make armor upgrades easy. That's also why we got first dibs on the new armor."

Well that just wasn't right, the contractor thought indignantly. American tank units with foreign officers using foreign tanks? Had the contractor been more religious, the word "blasphemy" might have popped up in his head.

**Post Housing
Fort Bragg
North Carolina
12 April**

"Honey, I'm home!"

"Welcome home, dear. What's in the boxes?"

"New helmet and inserts for my protective vest. They're supposed to be better than the old ones. I'll believe it when I see it."

"Well give them here and eat your dinner. My, these are heavy!"

"Eh, not that heavy. They're about the same weight as the old stuff. Is that lasagna I smell?"

"Yes it is. It's a special secret recipe. Why are these things so thin?"

"It's the same new magic armor that everyone wants. The boys have started to call the stuff 'Weberfoam', whatever the hell that is. And Chef Boyardee is not some super secret recipe."

"Well obviously, Chef Boyardee stole the recipe from my family. Are you sure this armor will protect you from anything? It seems awfully flimsy."

"That plate in your hands is *supposed* to be able to bounce a thirty millimeter bullet off of it. Of course, if I get hit with a thirty mil, I'll probably get my chest crushed into chunky goo, penetration or no penetration. And Chef Boyardee so did not steal your family recipe."

"Yes they did. It's either that or you can go celibate for the rest of your time on this Earth. Now eat your dinner."

"Yes, dear."

Geostationary Orbit
Leopard Dropship *Averly*
Earth
5 April 2006

Captain Allister Davis frowned as he stood, well mostly floated with his feet attached to what was the floor under gravity, at the entrance to the room that used to be the AeroSpace Fighter Deck. Sure it had long since been converted to a cargo hold, but right now it didn't even resemble that.

He just had to get himself and his Dropship conscripted by Vorax, didn't he? He shook his head. At least the Motherloaders had stopped shooting at his Dropship when he had waved the white flag, just moments after they had stormed his Dropship.

He and his crew were treated well, but right now he had his doubts in whether he should just open the cargo bay doors and space them all for what they had done to his ship.

Hell, *Averly* might not be able to ever again transport Mechs with each Mech Bay converted into what these GDI people called a radar boom. He had seen radar systems before, none of them had the size of an entire Mech Bay.

The technicians who had installed them over the last month had called these monstrosities AEGIS class radars. But to Davis the didn't look like it. A Radar was supposed to have a rotating antenna. These only had a couple of folding panels that deployed upwards once the Mech Bay doors were opened up. From what he had heard these things used to be surface naval ships where they acted as some sort of fire control radar.

But was that of any use while being in orbit around the planet?

He shook his head as he slowly walked into the room and through the rows of consoles that were placed throughout the former cargodeck, cables lying on the floor, held down by tape so that they didn't float around. For a moment his glance went to the metal

cabinet like thing in the back of the room to the thing the Motherloaders called a 'Mainframe'.

Davis understood a few things about maintenance, having grown up on *Averly*, and had seen his ship's mainframe a few times. A mainframe was supposed to be at least ten times larger than that thing.

"Captain Davis," he heard the voice of Commander Allan Brigger behind him and had to suppress a sigh as he turned around. He didn't like that guy. He was reminded too much of people like Vorax, a somewhat slimy guy whose only job seemed to be, to torture people like him that just wanted to get by.

"Commander Brigger," he said and put up his best fake smile. "I trust everything is going well?"

Brigger smiled that typical superior smile of his before nodding.

"It's going better than we had hoped," Brigger noted. "Through we will need to add a few more systems. Things like ground penetrating radar and some other remote sensing systems."

Davis would freely admit that most of that went right over his head, but he would not do it in front of Brigger. The guy would just take the pleasure to rub it in.

"So you are going to gut my ship even more?" he instead asked with another frown, causing Brigger to laugh.

"It looks like it. But I think you should be proud to have the first Reconnaissance Dropship the Inner Sphere will have seen in centuries."

Davis breathed in. He didn't want to have his ship gutted any further. And he didn't want to deal any more with Brigger.

"If you please excuse me," he said and turned around. "I have to take a look at engineering. Apparently you guys use more energy than we expected."

**Headquarters Building, 1st Battlemech Battalion, 1st Global
Combat Brigade
Fort Irwin
California
Earth
2 April 2006**

"Okay, does anyone have any other issues that need to be brought up?" Lieutenant Colonel Elroy Jackson asked, looking around at his assembled battalion officers. There was a general shaking of heads and blank stares. "Alright, then. Dismissed," he ordered. As everyone got up and started filing out of the meeting room, Jackson added, "XO, stay a moment."

"Yes, sir," Major Aladdin Al Azim replied

As the rest of the officers filed out, Jackson studied the man that had been foisted on him as his XO. Jackson had expected not to like the man. Azim's appointment to the XO's position just stank of the worst political put up jobs he had ever seen. For a start, the man was an alien, literally from another planet come to invade the planet Earth only to have a change of heart when he found the holy city of his religion standing here. Another issue was that Azim was a "Hero" which in Jackson's mind translated into "Glory Hound who gets good soldiers killed". And of course there was the ever touchy subject of religion...

But whatever Jackson had expected, the man he got wasn't it. Azim was a quiet man and a hard worker. What's more, he certainly looked as if he knew his business when in came to training everyone in Battlemech operations, adapting smoothly to the pilot/copilot system the GDI insisted on using. And Azim certainly knew how to handle the "independent contractors" that made up Charlie Company. Jackson had at best expected a cowboy; what he got was someone like Mahatma Gandhi or the Dahli Lama.

Unless you brought up the subject of the Draconis Combine; then Azim showed another side completely.

"Nice AAR, XO," Jackson said as the last officer filed out.

"Thank you, sir," Azim replied with a slight bow of his head.

"I especially liked how you critiqued Jankowski's performance without coming down too hard on the kid," Jackson observed. "Not enough officers have the feel for that kind of thing."

"I just did what any good officer would have, sir," Azim said. No bragging here. Azim made the statement a certain fact.

"Of course you did," Jackson said dryly. "But speaking officer to officer, I have got to ask, how do you people do it?"

"Do what, sir?" Azim asked, obviously not understanding.

"Let me be clear here," Jackson said. "How the hell do you people," Jackson pointed at the ceiling, "manage to run any kind of military organization with the fucked up logistics you must have?"

"I'm not sure I understand what you are talking about, sir."

"Azim, I'm a tanker," Jackson began. "Or rather, I'm an ex-tanker trying to learn how to be a 'mechwarrior'. Piloting a mech is easy. Running a mech unit? My God, man, we're supposed to be a battalion of thirty six mechs. But because of our... unique maintenance requirements, we've had a company of specialized mechanics and technicians and honest-to-God *scientists* attached to us. In my all my years in the Army, I've never seen a technical support unit attached directly to a mere battalion command. And then there are the mechs themselves."

"The mechs?"

"We have thirty six Mechs," Jackson said. "Thirty six machines that had been pounded into scrap months ago and painstakingly put back together. Some of those mechs don't have original parts and have God only knows how many jury rigged replacements. A few like that damned 'Mad Cat' were pieced together from several different Battlemech designs and are as temperamental as my daughter's house

cat. And even when I have whole mechs, I'm lucky to have four – FOUR – mechs that happen to be the same model, and even then one of those four had its primary weapon swapped out for something completely different!

"And don't even get me started on the juggling act that's laughingly called 'logistics'. There ain't no logic here. Dozens of different designs, each requiring their own unique set of spare parts, armor fittings, ammo load outs and ARE YOU LAUGHING AT ME, MAJOR?!"

"Ahem, sorry sir," Azim said apologetically, coughing. "But respectfully sir, what you're going through is no different than what other mech commanders throughout the Inner Sphere deal with every day. We don't have the luxury of having all the same types of Battlmechs in one unit. We have to use what we can get and replacements more often than not will come from what can be salvaged off the battlefield. Mech production is so low that we can't afford to throw away any mech just because its components are not compatible with the other mechs we already have. Simple monetary value doesn't begin to describe the value our mechs have to us. So if you're having problems, sir, it's no different than what anyone else has."

"Dammit, I know," Jackson whispered. He sighed. "Sorry, XO, for blowing steam on you."

"It's what a good XO is for, sir," Azim replied.

"No it's not," Jackson snorted. "But back to business. How's are my people shaping up?"

"For people completely new to mech piloting, not too bad actually," Azim answered. "The GDI has managed to assemble a truly talented pool of personnel, but they still need more training. Some like Dansel are as talented a student as one could ever wish for. But as a whole, I expect the battalion pilots to be rated strictly average to good by the time we hit Port Krin. But that's deceptive because this copilot system the GDI insists on improves performance surprisingly well."

"Hmm, I don't like my people being anything less than the best,"

Jackson said discontentedly. "But given the time table, I suppose it can't be helped. Luckily, Port Krin's supposed to only have a company of mechs and some infantry defending the place, so things shouldn't be too bad."

Ryan's "Palace"
Butte Hold
Coreward Periphery
14 January 3021

"So tell me again," Redjack Ryan, bandit king extraordinaire, asked his guest while fondling the slave girl in his lap. "Why should I give up my cozy little home here to spend the better part of a year crossing the Inner Sphere to a dump like Port Krin?"

Because, you jackass, thought Ryan's guest, a man who called only called himself "Arthur", you're expendable and we need a stalking horse to smoke out whatever high tech world is near Port Krin and smash it to bits... or trip any lethal booby traps that might have been laid. Wisely, Arthur refrained from actually saying that.

"I have it on good authority that the current administrator of Port Krin knows the location of a world filled with lostech," Arthur said instead. "He's managed to scrape up a small rag tag band to go take over the place. But alas, he's keeping the location secret from everyone. However, if you go see him personally and use your very special... charm on him, I'm sure you could convince him to part with the coordinates."

The slave girl in Ryan's lap squealed as he squeezed hard with one hand. Arthur paid her no mind.

"A world with lostech?" Ryan said thoughtfully. "Rich?"

"Very rich if the rumors are true," Arthur assured him.

"If, if, that is the word," Ryan mused. "But you mentioned something about an army?"

"A very motley army," Arthur told him. "Pirates of course, but of far

lower caliber than yourself. Your two battalions can handle them easily."

The slave girl whimpered miserably as Ryan pressed her head downward for more... oral services.

"It sounds too good to be true," Ryan told Arthur.

"Have I ever given you bad information before?" Arthur asked.

"Hmm, no," Ryan said. He leaned back to enjoy the slave girl's... work. "You know, I've been thinking this place is kind of small, boring even. Moving across the Inner Sphere might just be the change in scenery I was look for."

Well thank the Blessed Blake, Arthur thought.

August 17 2006/3021

Tokyo International Anime Fair '06

Closed Door Session

Upon first glance, the famous anime & manga expo in Japan would not be the first place one would consider to be a premier spot for that nation's possible mechanized future, both in the civilian/commercial world and the industrial military complex. Yet Japan was, and is, considered by many to be the beating heart of the world of robotics of all kinds. If it's not designed here, it's built there, and if it's not built here, it's designed there. That, combined with over 40 years of influence by the various anime produced made it almost impossible for any Japanese citizen to believe that anywhere else in the world could realistically build a mech first, or find actual every day uses for it better.

In short, it wasn't just national honor at stake, but national pride.

Many of the western nations had reaped heavy rewards via the sheer amounts of equipment salvaged after the attacks, or outright handed to them on a silver platter by defecting units. Saudi Arabia and the Middle-East were themselves about to undergo a cultural transformation that would have beggared the imaginations of diplomats only a year earlier from the actions of the Mechwarriors defending to the last, the gates to Mecca. For all that, Japan had received the attention of a single solitary Leopard class. Yet, in that small amount, they'd received an item that literally stood the robotics world, and its fictional anime counterparts, on end.

A functional Land-Air Mech, and a handful of other designs almost literally straight from the minds of Studio Nue, and from there, to Shoji Kawamori, if 'bastardized' by the artists at FASA. It was little wonder that the JSDF along with the Diet itself were alternating between wanting to pick his brain apart in what amounted to a mental dissection, and treating him as almost a living kami for the amount of deference treated him. Here was proof that the idea of a transformable, or even a semi-transformable design was possible to create and use effectively. Or at least, as many were soon to point out, including Kawamori, effectively as the Inner Sphere used them.

Of course that was only part of the bigger picture. Not only had the LAM allowed them to look at a workable and feasible transformation setup, but it'd also given them access to a hybrid jump-jet & fusion engine system that no other nation had picked up. They alone had a near mint condition and fully-working aerospace fighter engine sitting safely away at a locked down, and heavily guarded, Hyakuri Airfield while representatives from literally every science agency and industrial group swarmed over it. By now the entire LAM had already been picked clean to its skeleton with parts laid out around it like some strange mechanical dissection lab.

Yet that was up at Omitama, while the expo was in Tokyo itself. And what had started as a simple gathering of animators, anime industry leaders, and directors ended up snowballing into something completely different.

If there was a gathering that would have made an anime mecha otaku swoon with joy, this was it. The list was a practical who's-who of the very cream of the mecha industry: Go Nagai, Yoji Shinkawa, Hajime Katoki, Masamune Shirow, Yutaka Izubuchi, Hideaki Anno, Kenichi Sonoda, Shoji Kawamori, Nagano Mamoru, Ryōsuke Takahashi, and Michiaki SATO were the major players at an extremely mecha slanted expo this year.

So when virtually all of them, although Shirow as usual had ducked out before anyone could see him, made their way into a back room together and started discussing ideas - serious ideas - with Namco Bandai representatives, people started talking. When a major contributor and regular to the con, one of Fuji Heavy Industries' vice-presidents was spotted entering the room and what looked like bodyguards showing up around the room, speculation almost literally went ballistic. When two chairpersons from Toyota arrived out of the blue and the doors went shut, especially once the media covering the expo got wind of it, it hit national news and then international.

What many people internationally didn't understand is that a major portion of the so-called 'mecha' animators are fully trained and schooled mechanical engineers. A good example was the designs for the numerous robotic designs in the eponymous Mobile Suit Gundam

series, being that virtually all of them were based around artwork that could be easily built to be model kits by Bandai. In fact, almost every mecha designed post 1979 was designed just for this fashion. And if someone can build it as a kit, you can scale it. While nothing but a photo magnet, there had already been a 1:3 scale Zeta Gundam built in Japan, if almost completely non-functional, and Bandai/Sunrise already had tentative plans for a 1:1 scale model for the Gundam's 25th Anniversary.

So while the rest of the world looked on and shook their heads in bafflement, or outright disbelief, Japan held its breath, as these people could possibly really do something with their 'toy' designs. Especially as many of the senior animators have spent decades figuring out how best to get a range of motion from their designs. Especially those in the 'real robot' genre, who strived for as much realism as you could portray in an all-ages friendly media without boring the audience to tears.

It did go a bit surreal though, when the Namco Bandai rep left muttering about joining up with Microsoft and finally burying 'HG' for good.

It wouldn't be until years later that people figured out, after a bit of explaining, that it had all been a massive joint public relations coup to help unify the nation further, and build up spirits after the terrible double shame of the Second Pacific War and the Sato Terrorist Crash. Still though, it wasn't all tricks, as with Namco Bandai and several other 'toy' companies putting forward some very substantial funding towards Japan's own mecha, as they refuse to call them 'mechs', development - as long as the first one marching off the factory floor is an RX-78. That was the one thing everyone present had agreed upon, even if it was utterly weaponless, and tripped more than it moved.

Fort Irwin NTC, California
Buron Cavalry Administration
Meeting Room
January 6th

"They can't do that!"

"Yeah, no way!"

"Fuck this, are they insane?"

"What th.."

"**HEY!**", Major Staedele shouted into the briefing room housing his Mechwarriors. "Shut it."

They had taken the news that they would get co-pilots into their Mechs after a non-voluntary modification of their cockpits rather... bad. 'Admittedly', Staedele thought, 'my initial reaction wasn't much different.'

"Sorry people, but yes, they *can* do that. In fact, they're already beginning to modify our Mechs. Full command rights and technical access, that's the contract. They say jump, we jump, whether we like it or not. And believe me, I'm the first one to say that this is bullshit, but I doubt they'd ask anyone of us."

After that, the discussion went back and forth for another few minutes, before a small group of rather grumpy, but resigned Mechwarriors was dismissed and told to enjoy the rest of the evening. The news that they would have a day off the next day did somewhat improve their moods, too.

Staedele himself wasn't a friend of that co-pilot idea either, but on the other hand, he **was** somewhat curious. The last weeks had been rather nice. His lance had run training exercises against local units and he had found them to be very professional people and quite often fast learners. Their tankers soon figured out how to use their range advantage and superior numbers to compensate for the brute firepower and endurance of his Mechs. Not that he didn't learn a few things, either. That combined arms MOUT exercise the day before had ended with a righteously pissed off US Major after his armor had

ran into an ambush by Staedele's lance. They had managed to evade aerial recon by using the terrain, a whole lot of preparations and having their reactors running low. And a dose of luck, of course. Needless to say, the following short-ranged slugfest had been brutally one-sided. Nearly an entire battalion of tanks and IFVs had been cut into pieces before Iron lance had been brought down by concentrated artillery and air attacks, which had also caused a lot of collateral damage and thus, in the terms of the exercise, caused Blue Force to fail their objective despite the scenario having been intended as a last stand for Red Force.

So, how would that oversized Mech Battalion they were planning play out, especially with all the new things they'd try out? Staedele guessed that their company, Charlie, would be the training cadre for the others at least in the beginning. It was composed of defectors all around, at least for the pilots, while Alpha and Bravo would be locals that would have to learn the trade first. Well, except for LT Dansel. Staedele had seen a few of the recordings of the amok-run of that Hunchback and was genuinely looking forward to test the Lieutenant a bit more. The man was certainly a natural talent. And then there was Aladdin al Azim. From all he had heard, the man would make a fine CO. Of course, having about two dozen muslims in his unit, Staedele was already pretty well informed about the new hero of all muslims. And then there were all the other mercenaries. Oh well, that was going to be... interesting.

Fort Irwin NTC, California

Mechbay

January 7th

Marie Staedele was watching the local techs as they worked on the cockpit of *Hammer* with a strange mixture of paranoia, apprehension and curiosity. She knew by now that these guys were, by her standards, pretty much wizards when it came to electronics. But they still knew far less than she would have liked about Battlemechs. And, of course, for someone working in a resource-poor environment like her, the sheer radicality of what these guys were about to do was something indescribable. The closest word she could come up with was 'blasphemy'.

She shook her head. Chen was already watching like a hawk to keep these guys from doing any lasting damage to the Black Knight. She was right now more occupied with performing some standard maintenance and repair on the cooling system of *Altes Eisen*. And, of course, following her little hobby/obsession of searching the internals for the reason why small laser number two was always doing whatever the fuck it wanted. Consequently, the Warhammer was standing in front of the catwalk she was on, its back turned towards her with a small part of the rear armor stripped off to allow her easy access to the internals.

Just as she was about to stick her head back into the hole, one of the local technicians waved at her while walking in her direction. She waited for him to get over and shook his hand.

"Patrick Walton", the man introduced himself.

"Marie Staedele", she answered. Seeing his brows raising, she continued, "and yes, *that* Staedele. The major is my husband."

"Well then, nice to meet you, Mrs. Staedele", Walton answered in a friendly tone. "Would you mind if I take a look into that Mech? It's normally not my area, but I'm a bit curious."

"No problem, Mr. Walton." She handed him the flashlight she had been readying. "You might need that. Just please don't touch anything without asking first."

"M'am, yes, M'am", he answered with a laugh before his upper body vanished into the opening of the Warhammers torso. The next audible sign from him was a long whistle. "Nice."

A few minutes and some good questions from him later, Marie suddenly saw him tense a bit. "Something wrong, Mr. Walton?" she asked.

"No, I was just wondering. Some parts of that Mech seem to be a lot newer than others. This one's been through a lot."

"Oh, you can certainly say that", Marie answered thinking about the history of *Altes Eisen*. Walton's voice ripped her back into the present.

"Hey, one moment, that can't be right. That's gotta be some kind of mistake." his voice was ripe with disbelief. "What year is right now in the Inner Sphere?"

"3021. Why are you asking?"

"I'm asking, M'am, because that part of what I think is the cooling system over there has a stamp on it saying that it was made in 2897. That can't be right. That would mean that that part is over a hundred years old!" He was now noticeably agitated.

"124 years, to be exact, Mr. Walton." Marie told him with a smile. That situation had been coming up several times already with various local techs.

"How the hell does that thing even work after that much time?" He asked with even more disbelief in his voice while coming halfway out of the opening and looking back at her.

"Well", she casually said, "regular maintenance and repair is all that's needed. Wouldn't surprise me if there were even older parts. *Altes Eisen* was bought by the original founder of our unit back in 2862. Back then it wasn't really factory-new, either and the databank had been partially scrapped by a hit into the head. I don't think there's anyone who could actually tell you exactly how old this machine is, but I wouldn't wonder if that one has seen the 2nd Sucession War from the front row."

This caused Walton to just emptily stare at her, his jaw agape.

Fort Irwin NTC, California
Outside Buron Cavalry Administration
January 9th

"So, you are Major Staedele, I presume?" The tone in which this was asked made clear that it wasn't a question at all. It was also decidedly hostile. Staedele just looked at the officer that had demanded to speak with him, causing him to be called over from the other side of the base and throwing his timetable completely out of the window.

"Yes... Captain. May I ask your name?", he calmly replied after giving a formal salute.

"Captain Hal Stoops, 1st armor division. Reporting for service as your new co-pilot... sir."

Staedele noticed the pause. It was the same like that of most of the local military reacting to him on the first days. 'Ye gods, not one of those stuck-up reactionaries,' Staedele thought. Some of them were still arguing to pack any off-worlders into prison camps and throw the keys away.

"Nice to meet you, Captain. You were actually due to arrive yesterday, together with the other co-pilots. Now, if you would excuse me, but I have quite a timetable today. Staff Sergeant Martin can show you your room. His office is inside the building, left wing.", Staedele said.

"Sorry, sir, but shouldn't I be given a full rundown of this outfit of yours?"

'Now he's just sounding smug. That guy enjoys ruining my day,' Staedele thought by himself.

"Fine, captain. I'm going to give you a little tour. Would you follow me please?"

Mechbay

1 hour later

The tour had been one big disaster. Stoops had made clear with anything but direct words that he regarded the Burons as scum and himself as their watchdog. He had yelled at several of their personnel they had met during the tour for minor, sometimes imaginary, infractions, mostly not or (in his eyes) sloppily saluting him or the Major. The man had shown an attitude that made it hard for Staedele to not have him thrown out of 'his' part of the base immediately. Especially when the guy had all but insulted his wife when she was giving him the rundown on the safety rules for the Mechbay.

Fortunately, the tour was over. Staedele had shown the Captain the entire part of the base that was housing the Burons, ending the tour with the Mech Hangar, both to give the man a blink at what he'd be working with (prompting nothing but a sneer from the guy) and because he'd be in time for something else he had planned for the day.

"And that's it, Captain. Now, Staff Sergeant Martin over there will show you your room. I'll have to stay here. We are up for a full capability check on my Warhammer after the changes your technicians made."

But Stoops was not about to let the Major get rid of him (at least temporarily) that easy.

"With all due respect, sir" he began, emphasizing the 'sir' to the point where it almost sounded like a curse, "wouldn't that be a perfect opportunity to show me my new workplace?"

"Fine, Captain. I will let the techs ready a second cooling vest. We are slated to get some of those suits you developed, but they're only due for next week, so we'll have to manage with what we have", Staedele answered, gritting his teeth.

"I can barely wait for it, Major."

Walking over to the techs, Staedele could hear Stoops murmuring. "Pretty warm in here, isn't it?"

That brought a rather evil grin to Staedele's face. Perhaps this day would be fun after all.

Fort Irwin NTC, California
Buron Cavalry Administration
Major's Office
January 12th

Staedele was filing out another batch of paperwork, asking himself whether there'd be any end to it. At least the last days had worked out pretty well. The co-pilots had turned out to be rather nice people and

rather capable at their part in operating the Mechs. There was still some ice between the mercenaries and the army personnel, but even that was not a real issue anymore.

A discreet knock at the door interrupted him. "Come in."

Through the door came a Lieutenant Staedele hadn't seen before. The newcomer saluted smartly and greeted the Major correctly.

"Lieutenant Shawn Reed, reporting for duty, sir!"

"At ease, Lieutenant. We're not that strict with the protocol here," Staedele said while returning the salute. "So, what leads you here, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, I have been ordered to report to you as your new co-pilot." Reed answered.

"Ahh, yes. I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but all the paperwork is playing havoc with my thoughts. A pleasure to meet you." Staedele said, holding out his hand.

The Lieutenant shook it. "No problem, sir. And the pleasure is all mine," he said.

"Well, Lieutenant, it's already late so I don't think we will be able to show you the place today anymore. Staff Sergeant Martin will show you your room. You can find his office just down the corridor."

"Thank you, sir." Then Reed's face began showing a somewhat troubled expression. "Sir, may I ask you something?"

"Fire away, Lieutenant", Staedele answered, curious what his new co-pilot would want to know.

"Sir, I was told that I'm not your first co-pilot. What happened to the first one?"

That brought a thin smile to Staedele's lips. "Well, Lieutenant, let's just say that he couldn't stand the heat."

Negev Desert, Israel
Military Testing Range
February 1st 2006

Colonel Benjamin Rogov looked at the tanks through his binoculars.

The four Merkava Mk IV were the first to have received the so called BT refit.

He glanced to his side towards one of the many IMI advisers on site, the man looked haggard and probably hadn't had a decent night sleep in weeks.

But that had been going around, far more than normal. At least since the world went more nuts than usual.

There was a reason the Chinese considered 'May you live interesting times' a curse.

"Mister Hass?"

"oh, yes, yes, we have finished calibrating our equipment, we are ready Colonel"

Benjamin took a glance at the trailer, the geeks were inside, where the nice AC was keeping them at a comfortable temperature, as opposed to the cold of the predawn desert. But this wasn't the first time in the field, what was more he was a born and Breed Bersheva boy, the extreme weather conditions of the Negev where a fact of life for him.

Not that it stopped folks from complaining.

Very well, he then turned towards the radio operator, Tell Spear one he might begin his run.

The man quickly acknowledged and begun relaying the order.

Today's test was the whole package. The New gun, the new ammo, the new armor and the upgraded suspension.
The gun and the armor where the high points of the test, the new

gun, a British developed prototype, had been the main reason Hass' team had been having as little sleep, and the main thing that had warranted the use of an upgraded suspension.

Unlike the old L7, the gun was a smoothbore, but, if anything, was even heavier than the old rifled 105mm gun.

It had to be, at least to accommodate the IPAS round.

At least that little nightmare hadn't been his team's responsibility, for which Amos Hass was eternally grateful.

"Sir, Spear One acknowledges command"

Benjamin nodded slowly and turned his binoculars towards the row of tanks and the tell tale dust cloud that marked the lead element of the platoon as being on the move.

Inside Spear one, Captain Frederick Lis felt the engine rumble to life and felt as his tank begun to move.

He was feeling unnaturally proud of this new tank. He so wanted to show the annoyingly number of BT geeks what Earth armor was really capable of, and if he manage to cull their rants/demands for a locally built 'Mech' all the better.

Like most armor officers world wide, he was highly skeptic of the walking machines, too big a target, too little armor, well, at least now that his ride was fitted out with something resembling the alien machines, and too big a head on the jockey's part.

Was almost like dealing with air force primadonas, almost.

He looked at his display and noted the location.

"Izzy, full stop"

"Roger"

"Scorpion, Spear one, waypoint Alpha achieved"

"Acknowledge, Spear one, stand by for Fire Clearance"

"Roger"

"Spear on, Scorpion, Fire clearance granted, please proceed with Fire Test"

"Understood Scorpion, beginning test"

Somewhere outside there were a number of Slabs made from the BT-Substandard, as more than a few troops where nicknaming the material, of different thickness and different ranges and it was his tank's job to make sure each and everyone of them where turned to slag.

Alex, he said towards his gunner, feel free to target object A-1, fire when ready.

Roger

he felt the turret turn, and the familiar sounds of the gun's elevator's whine.

A few seconds latter Spear one Shook on its threads as the first IPAS left its barrel at a breakneck speed.

It was going to be the first of many.

The sun had already risen by the time the IMI personnel had retrieved the last of the target objects.

Colonel Rogov could see them muttering and fussing around, range test had gone well, though the penetration of the armor had been less than expected.

But at least it worked. And he was sure the eggheads where already thinking of ways to improve the warhead or at least trying to figure out why their predictions hadn't met reality.

Still, the test was far from over, Spear One had retreated from the field by then, but the rest of the spears where already at their target spots.

Now it came the hard part of the test.

Unlike One, the rest of the spears where uncrewed, they did had an ungodly amount of sensors, crash dummies, and full loadout. Now it was time to test how good the Substandard really was. Though for that they had contracted help. Still, he wasn't looking forward to this, having tanks under his command turned to salvage was not something he liked, even if they where test.

"Tell Major Staedele he and his men had green light to proceed with phase two" he said towards the radioman.

"Roger"

With morose hesitation he turned his binoculars towards Spear Two. Time to see if the new armor was all that was cracked up to be.

**Conference Room
Edwards Air Force Base
California
30 December, 2005**

Around a table covered with sourcebooks and starmaps, several people in heavily starched military uniforms and a few in cheap business suits took notes while two casually dressed young men debated heatedly about Earth's current situation and the best course of action to take.

The two Battletech "experts", Ted Logan and Preston Williams, had been recruited from their local gaming store, like many others all across the world. The purpose of their current meeting is brief members of America's intelligence community about what can be expected from Antallos in the event a retaliatory attack is approved, but the conversation had drifted as conversations are wont to do.

"Someone should look for a dragon lair around Cherry Creek Lake", Ted insisted.

Preston, exasperated, responded immediately. "We've been over this before, Battletech and Shadowrun are two different universes. If they weren't then cyborg Native American Elf Shamans would dominate warfare instead of mechwarriors".

"And I conceded that point. Were you listening at all. I said we should check for dragon lairs on our Earth, not on their Terra. We could be from some version of the Shadowrun universe and not know it", Ted replied.

"Wasn't the Shiawase Decision in 2001? I think we kind of missed it", a woman in an army uniform chimed in. Jane Godwin knew practically nothing about Battletech but had been playing Shadowrun for years.

Ted addressed his reply to Preston, rather than Jane. "Just because recent politics didn't go the same way doesn't mean we don't have the same ancient history."

Preston responded with a raised voice, "And the ancient history of Shadowrun is Earthdawn. There isn't any archeological evidence of that on our Earth."

"There wasn't any archeological evidence of it in Shadowrun either, until after the Awakening.", Ted replied.

Preston decided to take a different track. "Do you really want to live in a universe where Lovecraftian horrors from beyond space and time are destined to swarm into our world and eat us all?"

Ted's reply was immediate. "It doesn't matter what I want. You can't change reality just by wanting."

Preston's retort was sharper. "And the reality is that we don't live in Shadowrun".

Ted calmly replied. "We'll see when 2012 rolls around."

Preston looked like he's about to hit someone. "We'll see that you're wrong."

The CIA agent, Jason Stone, interrupted their argument, "Can we please get back to the business at hand?"

"Of course", Preston said. "Capturing Port Krin would be the easy part. The city-state's economy is propped up almost entirely by trade in drugs, weapons, and slaves. If we shut all that down Antallos' economy instantly hits the crapper. We'd have to spend huge amounts of resources just to keep it stable and we'd probably end up at war with the other city-states. Their economies would be devastated worse than Port Krin's. Desperation makes people do stupid things."

Albert Stoa of the Air Force spoke up for the first time, "We have to shut down the slave trade, if we take Krin. That's not negotiable."

Stacy Coombs of the Defense Intelligence Agency spoke up next, "Of course, and we can't turn a blind eye to the drugs and the guns

either."

"But we can regulate and tax them instead of shutting down the trade completely," Stone said.

Blake Whitmore, NSA, interjected, "It would be a complete reversal of the Whitehouse's drug policy and those of every civilized nation."

"But we can spin it," Stone replied.

The Navy officer, Justin Reynolds, looked up from his laptop. "Antallos isn't civilized. It would just be business as usual there, better than usual with the aid we'd be giving them. No one there would complain."

"We can spin it. Port Krin has it's own laws and because we're a democracy loving people we aren't going to impose our rule on them," Stone explained.

"Not beyond basic universally agreed upon human rights standards. We are going to impose those," Jane Godwin added.

The Marine, Hernando Vargas, who up to this point had been silent, finally asked, "If we find that dragon at Cherry Creek Lake, how should the situation be handled?"

Ted, glad that someone is finally listening to him, replied, "Leave him alone and don't hurt him. He's one of the good guys." Relatively. "Don't let any immortal elves kill him in his sleep, either. They're pricks like that. Don't do anything that could piss him off and have a reporter on hand to interview him when he wakes up."

"There won't be any dragon!", Preston said.

Ted smugly replied, "So you claim."

Preston threw up his hands in frustration and lets out a bellowing scream.

**Oval Office
White House
District of Columbia
2 January, 2006**

Jack Ryan, exhausted from reading stacks upon stacks of reports, plans, and recommendations, looked up as his Chief of Staff walks into his office. "Did you know that the Marines want to look for magical dragons in Denver?"

Tharkad

6 April 3021

A man in red overalls and a cap ran with all of his might. He ran as if his life depended on it, because it did. But more than that, the life of his sovereign depended on it. The Princess had been taken hostage by the most vile of monsters, one that intended to ravish her and force her into a sham marriage to steal control of her kingdom, and he knew in his heart that he was the only one who could save her. So he ran, he ran towards this monster's fortress. He ran past the usurper's minions, slaying some as he passed and simply leaving others behind; they were not fast enough to catch him. He ran across fields, he climbed up hills, he ran through tunnels, he leaped across chasms. He did not stop and he did not slow down until he reached the fortress, but what he found there gave him pause and he hesitated just a little.

The fortress was not guarded by troops and not equipped with any sort of weapons. Its defenses were entirely natural; it was constructed on top of a volcano. Inside there were vents in the floor where magma threatened to bubble up and consume the unwary. These vents were small enough to leap across and there was no other way around them. It was designed by a madman. He could feel the heat rising, threatening to broil him even from this distance; the slightest miscalculation, the tinniest misstep, and death was certain. It was insanity. It was also the only way, so he leaped.

He continued to run and to leap, losing count of the number of magma vents he crossed. He was able to avoid many of the odd revolving flamethrowers concealed in the fortress walls with precise timing, but one simply had too much range. It burned him, his skin blistered and bubbled where the flames struck, he could feel himself growing smaller and weaker under the inhumane weapon's onslaught. But still he pressed on. He pressed on until he came to It.

The monster was not at all what he expected. This was no a man, it was a turtle the size of a battlemech that walked on two legs, had giant deadly spikes, spewed fire from its mouth, and threw hammers in a ballistic arc at such a rate that one could almost mistake them for machine gun fire. And it was the last thing that stood between

him and the Princess. So Mario did the one and only thing that he could do. He ran with all of his might. He ran under the fireballs, he ran under the rain of hammers, and he ran under the King of Koopas just slightly too slow. Mario's bones were crushed to dust by the weight of the giant creature and his body reduced to a red smear on the bridge. A sickening MIDI tune played to signal his end and young Melissa Steiner almost throw the DS in frustration. It was her last life. She was so close yet so far.

Melissa Steiner almost threw the DS but she didn't. She knew that this lostech toy was probably more valuable than a Battlemaster. All it did was play games, but that didn't matter. No one could produce anything like it; it was unique and irreplaceable. The packaging that it came in suggested that it had been mass produced before the Star League fell. Now it was a diversion that only royalty would possibly afford.

This particular item, which was unlike anything ever seen in the Lyran Commonwealth, came from a cache found by small time Periphery pirates of all things. It arrived on Tharkad in the hands of LIC agents who obtained it and a few other lostech devices from the same cache through a series of convoluted trades. The other items, small portable computers, were in a laboratory being taken apart and examined with the most powerful microscopes available. Melissa received the DS as a gift because a game machine was of little interest to engineers and scientists concerned with building better weapon systems.

Melissa found all of this curious. She found it curious that a tiny periphery world would have lostech of a sort that no one has even heard rumors of. She found it curious that the cardboard box the toy came in was bright and shinny, brand new in appearance, when it should have shown signs of centuries of wear and decay. But most of all she found that marks of origin that were stamped onto the machine's plastic case to be curious - "Nintendo of Australia" and "Made in Japan". She knew of these places, she read of them countless times. They were countries on Terra ages ago and they hadn't existed as independent entities in nearly a thousand years.

It was ancient and it was brand new, very curious indeed.

She could have attempted to discuss this with the scientists the who were examining the other lostech but that would have been pointless. No one listens to a kid, not even one who is destined to become Archon. Instead she scoured her vast bookshelf and found a monstrously thick tome about electronics design. She placed it on her desk, turned on her work lamp, and removed a tri-wing screwdriver from a drawer.

Andrews AFB, Maryland.
Motherload.
February 12, 2006.

"Natasha! I have great news and even greater news!" Greene said, accosting Natalie as she made her way to the mess hall for breakfast.

"Natalie, not Natasha. Natalie. I know your primitive mind can't comprehend a difference of two syllables, but try to get my name right for once." Natalie replied.

"Okay, Natashalie!" Greene replied with a cheeky smile.

"Damn it, Greene! For the last fucking time," Natalie started, before realizing it wouldn't do any good. Even her usual standby, namely 'threats of ruptured testicals', didn't faze him. "Fine, what's this news?"

"A lot of our vehicles use multiple crew to increase performance. It's a lot easier to focus on fighting when you've got another crewman keeping an eye on the radar, y'know?" Greene replied.

"And?" Natalie replied, mulling it over. She suspected that they wanted to saddle her with a navigator. Part of her, the powerful and self-sufficient mechwarrior part, felt affronted. The other part, the more practical one that had fought in the streets of DC, admitted that it might be helpful. She'd always loved the actual fighting more than the boring scanner-gazing and target designation, so getting someone to delegate the drudgeries of mechwarriordom so she could focus on the real fun wouldn't be so bad.

So long as it wasn't Greene. She still smarted from the trick he'd played on her. The fate of a mechwarrior was linked to that of their mechs at the most basic level. The idea that an -admittedly insane-infantryman could steal her mech out from under left her shivering. It made her feel weak and vulnerable.

She hated that feeling.

"They want to install a console into your mech for a second crewman. They also want to rip out one of the double heat sinks to install a better targeting computer, but they won't plug it in until they've got the coding right to work with your systems." Greene replied.

Natalie blinked. If what she'd heard about the Motherloader - she still refused to refer to it as "Earth" - targeting systems were true, she'd be able to nail an Atlas' head at four clicks easy. On the other hand, losing even one freezer would mean she'd have to keep a closer eye on her heat buildup.

"Do I have a choice on this?" She asked.

Greene shook his head. "Not really. The agreement you made specifically states that we get access to your mech, provided we return it in workable condition afterwards."

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Anyone would love to look over an almost-new Starleague era Battlemaster, loaded to the brim with lostech. She'd figured it would have sweetened the deal.

And it did. It's just that when it came down to things, she didn't like other people touching her mech. And cutting out bits from it like some pre-spaceflight witch doctor slash surgeon? That left a foul taste in her mouth.

"So what's the good news?"

"That was the good news! The great news is that they want me to be your copilot!" Greene replied, smiling. "I know, what's a crazy infantryman like me going to do in a mech cockpit, right? But the guys in charge of the project decided that since I have experience with you, it'd be easier to just retrain me than pulling off a copilot from some needy helicopter squadron or tank platoon."

"Oh joy," She replied.

"That's exactly what I said! Though I must admit my response was a lot more gleeful." Greene replied, before sighing and saying, "But there is some bad news too."

"You never said anything about bad news!" Natalie shot back.

"I just did," Greene replied, smiling. "GDI, in its infinite wisdom is impressing me into service. I guess they recognize grade-A manmeat when they see it!"

"GDI? You mean that coalition you Motherloaders are building to try and protect yourselves from the sphere?" Natalie asked, ignoring his quip.

"Yeah. Though in this case it's less "protect ourselves" and more "go out and kick down some spheroid doors. Scuttlebutt is that the first stop on our tour of galactic domination is Antallos," Greene replied.

Natalie snorted, "Not that killing Krinners doesn't appeal to me, but I don't think you savages could take even a hole like that."

"Natasha, my dear... We have not yet begun to fight!" Greene replied, waving his hands in the air for emphasis. "Vorax's invasion played to his strengths while shunning ours. This will be quite different. Imagine – oh, let's say you're walking around in your mech. Suddenly, angry explosive bomblets each as powerful as an SRM! Thousands of them!"

"I'll believe you motherloaders are some kind of super-soldiers when I see it," Natalie replied, putting on a smile of her own. "So how do I fit into all of this? Will our time together be cut short by your deployment?"

"There's a little too much hope in that voice of yours, darling," Greene replied. "But in all honesty, I don't know. You'll have to ask your liaison for that."

"Right, which is why I'm asking you." Natalie replied, shrugging.

"Your official one."

"Oh."

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Brox loved Motherload. Oh yes. There were people as far as the eye could see. People of every different shape and size.

Of course, if the natives were to be believed, with the evidence he'd seen pointing to "yes," Motherload wasn't just Motherload. It was Terra. Big T. The dream of every red-blooded Clansman was to set foot upon it. And here he was. The first trueborn Clansman to ever actually tread its hallowed ground.

So in a way it was still a motherload. An even bigger motherload than everyone thought, even if only in sentimental terms. And only for the Clans, really.

The irony wasn't lost on him. The first Clansman to see holy Terra wasn't a khan, or even a warrior. It was an ex-ex-bandit who couldn't even talk about what he'd seen.

But things were wrong. Terra wasn't where it should have been. Indeed, if the natives were correct, there were now two Terras. And that would just cause all sorts of trouble. It'd be fun to see what happened in the future. He wondered what his brothers and sisters back on Stranha Mechty would think. He had little doubt the rest of the Ghost Bears would take it in stride, and seeing the witless jaguars or falcons pop a collective blood vessel would be worth it. Alas, if only he could go back without being executed immediately. As it was, the most he could hope for was that he'd be alive to see the waves this Terra would make in the universe.

But the location wasn't the only thing that was slightly *off*. Their tech was as schizophrenic as Captain Blue. On one hand, they had computers that put even the finest of the Clans to shame. The first thing Brox had done with his cut of the contract, after converting some of it to local "dollars" was buy a "lap-top." The idea of a computer you could actually carry was such a novelty that he simply had to have one. Now he just needed some programs to go with it.

But on the other hand, their weapons and armor were terribly primitive. Why, they didn't even have fusion power! What kind of

world has computers you can fit in the palm of your hand, but doesn't have fusion? It was madness.

And then Brox almost had a heart attack.

He'd entered the PX of the base where he'd been stationed to pick up something for his new toy. He'd always enjoyed games, so he made a line straight to the games section. His shadow – a Terran intelligence personage, no doubt – followed dutifully behind him. He approved of the caution. He wouldn't trust himself either. Especially since he'd already turned on his employers once. Granted Vorax was amongst the lowest scum in the sphere, but it was still a bad precedent.

Brox liked being a mercenary much more than being a bandit, even if the two ended up being practically interchangeable.

It was with that thought that he saw *it*.

There, on a back shelf, stood a shiny reflective box, emblazoned with the words "Mechwarrior 3" upon it. Other boxes labeled "Mechwarrior 4" were arrayed all around it, but he dismissed them and focused intensely on his original target.

It had a particular mech on its cover. A mech he'd seen and loved and lost. His heart stopped for a beat. Timber Wolf. He'd recognize its lines and silhouette anywhere.

His hand slipped over the box almost reverently, even as his mind exploded with sheer incredulous possibilities. How could these people have gotten it so right?

He regretted how he hadn't paid attention to the Terrans' newscasts before. Perhaps it might have shed some light on this mystery earlier.

Brox bought the game and smiled absently at the pretty salesgirl behind the counter, his mind on other things.

Timber Wolves. How? When? What exactly did these people know of the Clans?

Brox was determined to find out.

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"Come in, Lance Leader Fischer. Please be seated."

"Thank you." Natalie replied, taking a seat.

"You may call me Colonel Shepherd. I am your official liaison with the United States, and through them, to the Global Defense Initiative," The man said. "In the folder before you is our preliminary plan for the liberation of Port Krin. We'd like you to be a part of this operation."

As Natalie read, Shepherd continued. "Your other two subordinates will remain with us as collateral. As one of them is currently undergoing hospitalization following her bad ejection, this shouldn't come as a surprise."

Natalie nodded. Tyron hadn't left Janet's bedside since the battle. It's a good thing Brox was clearly the better pilot. "What's the pay?"

"Generous. Quite generous. However, you will not be piloting your current mech. In all frankness, it's too valuable to risk. We have salvaged several Battlemasters from other battles across this planet, and will assign them for your use once we've refitted them." Shepherd replied.

"Not happening. I know my mech and it knows me. If I'm going to throw myself into the lion's den – or the angry giant rat's den as the case may be – I'm doing it in my mech, not a refurbished third-liner," Natalie replied.

"I assure you, Miss Fischer, that I can offer you more money than you can possibly imagine." Shepherd said, leaning back and smiling.

"I can imagine an awful lot." Natalie replied.

"Oh?" He replied.

"I want a bajillion trillion dollars!" Natalie replied, thinking her back to the Motherloader news reports she'd seen. A trillion dollars was supposed to be a lot of cash. It was the principle, mainly.

"I see," He chuckled, reminding her of Greene. "It seems you can indeed imagine more than I am prepared to offer. You receive full combat pay from the time you set foot on Antallos until you're removed. Transportation and logistics are included. Rates will be set as per your contract with us. I understand it to be a highly lucrative arrangement by your standards. Consider it a gift for giving up your mech and accepting a subordinate position in the battalion's assault lance."

Natalie paused. Full combat pay could end up being a *lot* of money, depending on how much combat she saw. And knowing her luck, it'd probably be a lot. Perhaps enough to refit her lance's mechs with all sorts of Motherloader/lostech goodies. On the other hand, downgrading to a normal Battlemaster after experiencing the best the Star League could offer?

Curiously, playing second fiddle to another lance leader didn't bother her so much. It saved her having to worry about the burdens of command, at least for a little while. That'd be rather pleasant.

"Combat pay... With a bonus per kill, and first dibs on salvage." She countered.

"Combat pay, yes. Kill bonus, yes. Salvage rights are not happening." He replied. "I assure you, no better offer is forthcoming."

"Agreed." Natalie replied. She hadn't really been expecting the salvage, but it never hurt to be a little greedy when it came to contracts. One never knew when the employer would cave. "Well bargained, and done."

As she said this, in a place elsewhere on the base, Brox paused his installation of Mechwarrior 3 to sneeze.

"Wonderful. I'd like you to report back to your dropship at nine hundred tomorrow for the briefing on your new equipment, at which

point you will be redeployed to Fort Irwin for unit cohesion training with the rest of our mech forces." Shepherd replied, fixing her with an odd look before shaking her hand and then dismissing her.

Natalie didn't see Greene stride into Freeman's office; she'd already left.

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"At ease, Corporal Greene. Or should I say Lieutenant Greene? Your country needs a task of you." Shepherd started.

"Sir?" Greene asked. "Wait, what's this about Lieutenant, sir?"

"Indeed. For your performance in the battle for Washington, you're being promoted. Consider it bureaucratic nonsense with a pay hike if you'd like. Now, onto more important things. You have no doubt heard rumors of our plans for Antallos?" Shepherd replied. Greene nodded. "We are deploying some of our spheroid mercenaries alongside the conventional GDI forces. Lance Leader Fischer is to be one of the mercenaries deployed."

"I gathered as much. So you want me to ride shotgun, just like I was going to when she was to train our men in anti-mech tactics?" Greene asked.

"Yes... And no. Officially, we trust our mercenaries enough to allow them semi-independence. Unofficially, we don't trust them as far as we can launch them out of a cannon," Shepherd replied. "For obvious reasons, of course."

"Of course." Greene nodded.

"Are you familiar with the concept of the Commissar?" Shepherd asked.

"I don't think Fischer is a coward, sir," Greene replied. "That's what Commissars do, isn't it? Shoot people who run away from a fight?"

"Not a coward, perhaps. But her loyalty is in question. In the event

that she attempts to betray us, you are to terminate her and take control of her mech yourself." Shepherd replied. "All our other mechs will have similar dual-cockpit arrangements."

Greene paused, swallowed, and nodded. Then, with a sigh, he replied, "Understood, sir. I just hope it doesn't come down to that. Blood is hell to get out of a uniform."

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"Dani, what have you guys *done* to that Battlemaster?" Natalie asked as she entered the *Roger's* cavernous hangar. There were four mechs, Battlemasters, standing rigidly towards the rear of the bay. All of them were in various states of de- and re-construction. It looked like a Solaris salvage house, right down to the swarming of orange-vested technicians, who were buzzing along and doing a thousand maintenance related tasks that Natalie could scarcely keep track of.

Directing the work was Dani, her ever-helpful tech buddy.

"Mmm? Oh, hey Nat. Yeah, I've been working with the natives to get this thing back into fighting shape. Let me tell you, their guns might suck and their armor might as well be tinfoil, but their electronics are the best damn thing I've ever seen. Getting the systems integrated was a bitch, but I think I've got a system kludged together reliably. With this thing, you'll have a direct datafeed to just about everyone else on your side. Like super-duper C3."

"C3?" Natalie asked.

"It's a lostech thing. Really cool. I'd only heard stories about it before I came here. Basically, you can share targeting and sensor data across your entire lance. Except with this gear, you can share that data across the entire invasion force. It's damn cool." Dani replied.

Then, continuing, the diminutive blonde added, "And if that weren't enough, we added a laser designator to the side of the cockpit, so you can designate targets for artillery or missiles, to go along with that datalinking. If these guys' stats are accurate, their artillery is crazy good."

"I was thinking more about that... Whatever the hell you replaced the PPC with." Natalie replied, waving towards the nearest Battlemaster. In all honesty, the extra antennas hadn't caught her eye, not like the strange gun strapped to the mech's arm.

"Ah. That is the improved rifle!" Dani replied. At Natalie's blank stare, she added, "Basically, it's the same weapon the natives use in their tanks. We had to take away the machine guns to fit the ammo, but it's worth it. Trust me."

"You mean the tanks I slaughtered effortlessly? You took away a PPC for one of those popguns?" Natalie asked, remembering the ting of a Motherloader tank round ringing on her armor.

"After giving them improved ammunition! You say it like I was sending you into battle naked or something," Dani replied. "The gun is perfectly sufficient for blasting big holes in a mech's armor. It's not an AC-20, but it's still pretty nice. And the best thing is that it only fires one shot per burst, so you can get a lot of shots per ton of ammo."

"Speaking of which," Dani added, tapping her chin, "the ammo feed is based on a system adapted from their tanks. If you take a hit there, you'll lose the gun and probably the arm it's attached to, but nothing else. The ammo is stored in magazine-like 'cells' that explode outwards away from anything vital when hit. It's very cool."

Natalie blinked. She'd seen enough ammo explosions to last her a lifetime. "Are you saying I don't have to worry about ammo cookoff?"

"No! Of course you do," Dani replied, apologetically. "It's just that you're only sorta-screwed if it happens rather than "OH GOD I AM FUCKED." I'm working with the Earthlings to design an even better kind for a mech that'll vent the explosion totally away from everything – lose the ammo and some armor, but nothing else – but I'm pretty sure it won't be ready by the time they want to deploy."

"Earthlings? Dani, come on. Tell me you don't believe this bullshit about Earth too!" Natalie asked.

"Come on, Nat! I know it sounds cheesy, but it all fits! And you can't tell me that the planet doesn't look like Terra from space."

Natalie shrugged. "Fine, fine. Okay. What else do you have for me?"

"Not much. Just the commo equipment I mentioned earlier and the plugsuit, but that can wait," She replied. "So what's this I hear about you getting a new beau? Come on, give me the details..."

"He's not my beau," Natalie replied hastily. "What's this about a plugsuit?"

"Ah," Dani replied, pouting at her friend's unwillingness to gossip. "That's what one of the techs called it. It's a full body cooling suit. It should keep you nice and chilly in that hot cockpit. Here, take a look."

She held up a black something with tubes running across its surface. It was shiny, and it looked about two sizes too small.

In fact, it looked like fetishist gear more than a cooling suit.

"Don't get me wrong, a full body cooling suit sounds real nice... But does it really have to look so skanky?" Natalie asked.

"But Natasha, dear, you *are* a skank! That's why I love you so!" Greene's voice was playful, even as it rose from behind her.

"Shut up, Greene!" Natalie roared, pivoting on her heels to fix the newcomer with a withering stare.

"So this is him, huh?" Dani said, looking the man over. "Well, he's got a certain rugged charm. I love the five o'clock shadow look. I think you need to train him better though."

"Touched a nerve, did I Natasha?" Greene replied with his trademark grin. "Aww, don't feel too bad. Mine looks just as man-whoreish."

His was the same as hers, except larger to accommodate his larger

frame.

What was the term? Ah. Form fitting.

"It does, doesn't it?" Natalie replied. "Why, now I get to see whether all your boasts are true, Greene!"

"Ah, not so fast my dear! I have not once boasted of my enormous endowment! Have you been thinking about me in perverse ways, Natasha?" Greene replied with a smile. "I'm flattered, but I'm much more interested in a candlelight dinner with wine and a soft kiss than whatever sick sexual kinks you have!"

Dani looked like she was about to crack up.

"I don't see what's so funny about this, *Danielle*." Natalie said, whirling on Dani.

"Hey! No need to call me names, Nat," Dani frowned. "I didn't design the plugsuit. I'm told they outsourced it to Japan, as if that's supposed to explain everything. Suffice to say that while it does leave little to the imagination, it'll definitely keep you cool and comfortable. Even if it might ride up in places."

Natalie snorted, then turned on Greene and asked "Why are you here? Don't tell me I have to take you into combat with me?"

"Yes, that's exactly what has to happen, love." Greene replied. "Don't worry, I've been spending my time learning the new systems. I never let a lady down."

"I thought you just said you never boast." Natalie replied.

"Not about that, at least." Greene replied. "Anyway, they want us to ship out soon. We're heading out to Fort Irwin, if you didn't know. I figured I'd hitch a ride along with you kind folks. After all, we're going to be fighting together, so I want to know who else is in my foxhole, as it were."

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"Yes?" Colonel Shepherd asked, looking up from his laptop at the new arrival. His office was in a state of organized chaos, with many things half packed and half loose. He was going to Fort Irwin as well, at least until his mercenaries started off for Antallos.

"His reaction to the plant was suggestive. I think we have ourselves a genuine Clanner." The interloper said.

Shepherd chuckled for a moment. They all thought him paranoid. *"Why, we don't even know if the Clans exist!"* They said. *"Do you know how likely it is that a Clanner ended up here, on the opposite end of the sphere from Stranha Mechty?"* They said. *"He's got some genetic anomalies compared to the rest of them, but that's not proof of anything."* They said.

Who was paranoid now?

"I see. Do you think he suspects we're on to him?" Shepherd asked.

"Neg."

"Very funny," Shepherd replied. "I think it's time that Mechwarrior Brox and I had a chat about the weather."

Edit/Consolidation:

Club Kassa
New Avalon, Federated Suns
3022/2005

Club Kassa was one of the more upscale bars on New Avalon. Its subdued neo-classical music and low-key atmosphere appealed to its primary patronage; that is, the academics of the nearby NAIS. They came to unwind, much like Doctor Gosserian, head of computer development did.

Others came to find that special someone, or at least someone special enough to keep the bed nice and toasty. Scientists getting frisky outside the lab.

Sub-Director Richardson came for one of the many unofficial meetings that were part and parcel of MIIO intelligence work. He'd have come anyway, though it didn't hurt that he had something of a personal interest in this case. His niece was one of the deep cover operatives who went on the "Motherload run" and never returned. Finding out everything he could about this "Motherload", then, followed naturally. And Doctor Grosserian had something interesting to report. At least that's what his note had said.

"So where did you get it, my friend? It's one of the most fascinating pieces of lostech I've ever seen. If it is indeed lostech at all." Doctor Gosserian asked as Richardson took a seat at his table.

"We bought it on Antallos. Got it from a pirate – a man by the name of Vorax. Apparently he stole it from this planet he calls "Motherload."" Richardson replied, sipping his drink.

"Motherload. That's apt. The computer you brought back is worth its weight in germanium, I think." The doctor replied.

"Oh?" Richardson asked. Gosserian wasn't one to exaggerate like that. Indulge in leaps of logic that make $1 + 1 = \textit{Fish}$ seem tame, sure, but he never exaggerated. "What can you tell me about it, Doctor?"

"Well, it's fascinating for one. Before you brought it to me, I would have assumed such things were impossible. When you get so small, you start running into all sorts of pesky physical laws that make things difficult. It's a fully fledged computer system. I don't mean like those datapads that mech-techs use for maintenance. It's the actual thing."

"I thought computers were big mainframes; the smallest ones we have are the ones we put in mechs, aren't they?" Richardson asked.

"Exactly! Even those weigh several tons. But this? This computer weighs only six pounds! That's not all. If its internal documentation is accurate, its raw processing power rivals that of a Star League mainframe." Gosserian replied.

"Just how big is a Star League mainframe?" Richardson asked.

"Let me put it like this: we're talking the sort of thing you build a room around."

"You can hold this one in your hand." Richardson replied, feeling nervous.

"I know! It's fascinating, isn't it? In fact, I'm not sure it even *is* lostech."

"What do you mean?" Richardson asked.

"This device took a totally different tract to the rest of the Star League's computer development. Our computers are like a sort of neural net. They share a lot in common with a human brain. Optical processors arranged in a central 'cortex' with neurons – workstations – spreading out. They're comparatively slow and not very compact, but they're capable of fuzzy logic and easy adaptive processing. This device, on the other hand, is the opposite. It's small and blindingly fast – say you want to make an FTL jump. It would take you longer to punch in the variables than it would this computer to crunch the numbers. However, it doesn't do fuzzy logic. With this device, everything is either a zero or a one. A yes or a no. It can't do maybe like our computers can."

"How does that help us?" Richardson asked.

"Well, for most simple tasks or brute force calculations, this beats the pants off of our hardware. However, for more abstract tasks, our computers are better. Meteorology, for instance, or filtering out 'noise' on radar."

"What else can you tell me? Any good news?" Richardson asked.

"There are other downsides to this motherload approach." Grosserian continued, seemingly oblivious to Richardson's question. "Our hardware is redundant. Whole sectors can fail and the device can still keep running with those that remain, at reduced efficiency, granted. With this computer, one major failure will cause the entire system to

crash. It's so small that you simply can't have much redundancy. Not like what we're used to, at least. It won't last more than a few Terran standard years. Ten at the most. And that's worrying in of itself."

"How so?" Richardson asked.

"I cracked this computer open and took a peek at its internals. It had all the hallmarks of being freshly manufactured. And the chips were, quite frankly, frightening. I examined them under the best microscope I had, but I think there were still microprocessors that I couldn't see even at max magnification. Whoever built this is good at working small. We couldn't do it. I don't think even the Star League could do it, although I could be wrong since so much has been lost. But someone built this computer in the last year, tops, and you can be damn sure they know it'll wear out in a few years, so you can be damn sure they know how to replace it."

"I see why you're so concerned. Someone out there has the technology to do something that would have impressed the League, and they have the knowledge and the infrastructure to replace it when it fails. In fact, if it's designed with a lifespan of years, that's worrying in itself. What power has the industry to mass produce lostech computers every ten years?"

"You want to hear my worst case scenario?" Grosserian asked, a wholly unnatural glee coming into his eyes.

"Sure, lay it on me." Richardson asked warily, recognizing Grosserian's look. It was the look of madness. The one he got when he was going off into crazy speculation land.

"These people intentionally design their computers to fail. They do this because their technology advances so quickly that in ten years, what was once state of the art is about as useful as scrap metal."

"Someone who could advance like that could - If they can do this, what else can they do? Or rather, what *can't* they do?" Richardson asked.

As far as theories went, it wasn't nearly as bad as he'd expected. He

almost expected the good doctor to mention aliens.

"Exactly. But don't worry, that is the worst case scenario. Real doom and gloom stuff. I can't imagine anyone actually advancing like that."

"Who could these Motherloaders be?" Richardson asked.

"I have my own theories on this "Motherload."" Doctor Gosserian said, his lip curling upward in a confident smile.

"Oh?" Richardson asked. "Care to share?"

"The Grays." Gosserian replied.

And there they were. Somehow, Doctor Grosserian always directed the discussion back to extraterrestrial life, no matter how unlikely or unrelated to the matters at hand it was.

"Not this again. When I said "care to share", I wanted theories that weren't *completely* off the wall. Intelligent aliens count as "off the wall."" Richardson replied, rubbing his temples with one hand.

"I'm telling you! It's the most likely explanation! They are planning on invading! Motherload is a fabrication on their part to lure in piratical humans who won't be missed for their heinous experiments!" Gosserian replied. He waved his hands in the air for emphasis.

"Why would they make a keyboard with standard letters then?" Richardson asked.

"It's all part of their plot! Once they've learned about us, they'll start working against us from behind the scenes! They'll offer a technological trinket here, one there. Just enough to entice the successor lords into compliance! All the while, they'll be pulling the strings. Then, in a generation or two, they'll have complete control over the entire Inner Sphere, and nobody will know about it!"

"Why?" Richardson asked.

"Women! They want our women! Their own females are suffering

from infertility related to their star's radiation! It's the only explanation that makes sense!"

Richardson sighed. "Doctor, were you hitting the liquor before our meeting again?"

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Natalie sighed and rubbed her temples. God, that bitch had been working everyone ragged for the past week. It was almost like she was running some heinous experiment designed to see just how long a mechwarrior could fight against insane odds before they finally lose it and self-detonate their ammo.

Fighting an enemy that had, at least, four times the forces that Vorax could possibly call upon was one thing. Murphy's law and unexpected enemy reinforcements were something she could understand.

Giving the opposition Star League tech was another thing she could understand. Making training hell so combat didn't have to be was a principle she was familiar with. It didn't bother her. After all, she'd used a Star League mech for the past five years. She knew its weaknesses and drawbacks better than most. It was tough and simply *better* than normal succession war gear, but it wasn't unstoppable.

No, the problem was that the "Star League" tech they simulated was wrong. It was simply too good. The PPCs struck harder and hit further than even the ERPPC she'd used since appropriating *Old Melville* from its previous owner. The missiles were too accurate, too deadly. The enemy faux-mechs were too fast for the armor and engines they were supposed to have.

Brox hadn't helped matters. He'd been acting strangely ever since they arrived at Fort Irwin. He switched between calm and giddy even more readily than before. He'd always been a bit bipolar in his moods, but now he switched on a hair trigger. One minute she'd be talking with him, or rather, she'd be talking and he'd be listening, and then he'd become distracted staring wistfully at shelves with Motherloader "Battletech Fiction," or at the "Wildcat" frankenmech that they'd somehow managed to piece together from scrap.

She'd worked with Brox for five years, and she'd always been good at reading people. Something was definitely off here. She had the terrible feeling she was missing something.

And the Motherloaders definitely weren't training her – and themselves, to be fair – for taking down Vorax.

The question was, what kind of army has tech that's even better than what the Star League had?

Damnit, what was she missing?

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Brox didn't, to be perfectly frank, know what to think. These people knew of the Clans. Their "fiction" was anything but. They got the Clanner traditions down to the most exacting detail. The mech designs, the descriptions of omnitech, everything was accurate.

It's the only reason he didn't dismiss the stories themselves out of hand. Wardens like his own Ghost Bears voting to invade the Inner Sphere? And then, when the invasion actually went through, sending only a part of the Clan strength to invade the entire inner sphere? Did his brothers think the Spheroids would just roll over and submit if they took Terra? It's not like there wasn't enough to conquer or anything. Bidding down one's forces to the minimum necessary was honorable, to be sure... But all the Clans combined would have been pressed to take and rule the Scavenger States.

And Tuyykaid! Oh, Merciful Great Father, the idiocy of Tuyykaid! Where were the logistics? Why had all the clans save Wolf – even his beloved brother and sister Bears – fallen to victory disease? It was a blatantly obvious trap. Why hadn't they turned the trap back against its handler and put the Comguard to the torch? Why hadn't the Clans called for an immediate trial of refusal? Surrendering initiative to the Inner Sphere was a guaranteed death sentence for the Clans.

There was no way the Clans he knew could be so foolish. Even the Falcons or Jaguars were more cunning than that.

And yet, it was eerily plausible. A part of him understood just how things could go so wrong. It was altogether too easy to fall prey to one's own conceit.

Another part of him asked why he cared so much. He was no longer of the Clans. Indeed, if he showed his face on Stranha Mechty, and if someone recognized it, he'd be executed as a bandit. In a real sense, the Clans were his enemies.

Still, any failing on their part reflected poorly on him. Wasn't he raised in a sibko company, trained in a Clan battlemech?

Brox's thoughts were interrupted by the familiar silhouette of a Timber Wolf, caught out of the corner of his eye.

The damn thing was haunting him. He was starting to see it everywhere. In his breakfast cereal (Wheaties, the "breakfast of champions" the box had said), on the Terran newscasts... He even thought Lady Natalie was starting to look vaguely like a Timber Wolf, if he squinted at her just right.

"Ah. Mechwarrior Brox. How do you like the Wildcat? I wanted to call it the Wolf Hunter, but I was overruled."

Brox turned to the new voice, coming face to face with Colonel Shepherd, his liaison with his employers. The man was gesturing towards the mech he'd seen out of his eye's corne-

-Kerensky's blood! It *was* a Timber Wolf! This was no mere story or painting, no computer-rendered model. It was the real thing, standing with its back towards him, yet he could recognize its silhouette anywhere. The two box-like missile launchers on the shoulders. The reverse-jointed leg so popular amongst the Clans, along with the paired arms, loaded to the brim with weaponry. How had they gotten their hands on one? Where? When?

And then the thing turned, the better to maneuver its way to a nearby hangar.

He was almost disappointed, in a way. It was kludged together, clearly from the pieces of several different wrecked mechs – probably Catapults and Marauders. It certainly wasn't a true Timber Wolf.

They did, however, fix Brox's only true complaint with the Timber Wolf; its heinously exposed cockpit. This one was plated over and armored, with a tiny slit for viewing, and what he guessed was an extendible sensor mast on its rear center torso.

Brox reached down to his belt and the pad of paper he carried with himself at all times, to scrawl out a reply to the Colonel.

He could see in the man's eyes that his curious reaction had not gone unnoticed. The man knew. Or at least suspected.

The next words out of his mouth confirmed it: "Do you know what the weather's like on Stranha Mechty? I hear it's nice this time of year."

Brox chewed his lower lip, before sighing and writing "Let us cease this charade. Yes, I am of the Clans."

The Colonel smiled. "Now we're getting somewhere. What's your purpose here?"

"Earning a living." Brox wrote. "I am an exile. If I were to return to the homeworlds, I would be tried and executed quite quickly."

"Not spying?" Shepherd asked. "Interesting."

"You do not believe me." Brox wrote.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Shepherd shrugged. "At the moment, I'll take you at your word since it's the most plausible explanation. I will, of course, have to tell my superiors of this."

"Of course." Brox wrote.

"In the mean time, tell me what you think of the OPFOR in our exercises." Shepherd asked, almost offhandedly.

"You are trying to simulate Clan technology and tactics. You expect to face the Clans in the future." Brox wrote in reply. "However, your assessments of Clan technology are highly inaccurate for this purpose. Increase them by a factor of two or three and you will be closer to reality. In terms of piloting, you may use me as a baseline. I was only slightly above average in skill compared to the rest of my sib."

"Ha, I *knew* FASA hit you guys with the nerf bat!" Shepherd replied.

"Clarify?" Brox replied.

"Nah, nevermind. It's not important. I'm sure you'll figure it out anyway. Now, what do you know about Clan technology? Anything about its principles, or how it's made?"

"No. I am a mechwarrior. I was only in the technician caste for a short time before I fled the Clan. Battlefield statistics, these I can help you with. Production methods are beyond me." Brox wrote in reply.

"Thanks for your cooperation. It will reflect favorably upon you. I'll speak with my superiors, and see if there's anything they want to pick your brain for. Oh, and I'll also see about getting you a voice synthesizer. It's awfully hard to hold a question and answer session when you can't talk, quiaff?" Shepherd replied.

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Force Training Exercises – 1.5 months until deployment.

"Natasha, we just lost two tons of armor." Greene said, his voice was deathly calm.

"They hit us twice? No way, I only saw one PPC blast." Natalie replied.

"Nope. Looks like *someone* ramped up the OPFOR's gear again." Greene replied.

"But we were just starting to win!" Natalie pouted. "This is bullshit!"

"Less talking, more evading! We just lost another two tons of armor." Greene replied. "Iddqd. Iddqd. Iddqd..."

"What is that you're blathering about?" Natalie roared, only barely avoiding another PPC blast from well outside her own effective range.

"Boss Crazy Woman said it's like a computer game! So I'm trying to turn on god mode!"

Natalie felt a terrible urge to bash her head against the mech's console.

Greene sighed. "And... We're dead. Took a PPC blast straight to the cockpit."

"Damnit, Greene! If you hadn't been distracting me-"

"-No, I don't think it would have mattered one way or another. There was no cover and the enemy was hellishly accurate." Greene sighed.

Natalie wasn't pleased to admit that he was right.

"You know, Natasha, I think we need to work better with the rest of our forces. I just checked IVIS. Kilo-Six has smoke rounds for their big guns. Next time, if we request a fire mission of smoke here and here," Greene highlighted two locations on his LCD screen with a stylus, the coordinates instantly popped up on Natalie's holographic display. "I think the assault lance can advance under cover close enough to give those bastard reds a bit of retaliatory fire. Meanwhile, if our armored fist is on the ball, they'll swing around and hit the enemy mechs from the rear while we keep them distracted. I'll speak to Dansel about it."

"Why are you telling me then?" Natalie asked.

"Because, my dear, you are a sounding board for my ideas! If you had a valid complaint, I'd have taken it into consideration before bringing it to the lance leader." Greene replied.

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Force Training Exercises – One Week Later.

"Ha! Got you bastards! All your super duper lostech isn't worth shit when there's a Battlemaster's foot up your ass, is it?" Natalie roared.

"Simulated foot, dear." Greene replied. "Can't actually be kicking those highly expensive target dummies, after all."

"Yeah, yeah. Way to ruin my fun." Natalie pouted, before brightening up. "Point is this is the first solid victory in weeks! And I got to get it by sneaking up on one of those "Star League" guys and giving him a kick to the gonads!"

"Which you wouldn't have gotten if the rest of the battalion wasn't on the ball. Combined arms, love. Haven't you noticed that as we learn to work together with everyone else in the expedition, our killiness goes through the roof?"

"Yeah. It's just that I've never actually had aerospace or artillery support before. Dropships are too valuable to risk like that, and aerospace fighters are too expensive to maintain. Artillery's cheap, but inaccurate as all hell." Natalie replied.

"Not when you've got a handy target designator." Greene replied. "Say, Natasha. GDI is holding an officer's ball next week, and I would be honored if you would be my date for the evening."

"I don't think-" Natalie started.

"There will be chocolate. Rich, chocolatey chocolate straight from Switzerland." Greene replied. "I spoke to the caterers."

Natalie's mouth watered, and her feminine chocolate-neurons overrode the ones that were confused about her and Greene's ambiguous relationship.

"That's low, taking advantage of my addiction for your own gain."

She replied.

He had her, and they both knew it.

But then, seeing Greene's triumphant expression, she retaliated: "But I'll need to get a dress. And make up. So we're going to have to go shopping. And to go shopping, I'm going to need a pack mule. I'm volunteering you."

"I don't-" Greene started.

"I do." Natalie replied, smiling sweetly.

Greene sighed, then smiled. "You know, you have a cute smile. You should do it more often, rather than that angry frown of yours."

White House
Washington D.C.
December 18, 2005/3020

The White House party honoring the newly inducted members of the Global Defense Initiative was in full swing, and after the required dog and pony show and photo ops, freshly minted Second Lieutenant Tony Dandel was doing his very best to be unnoticed. The politicians were bad enough, but it seemed that just about every soldier who wasn't lost in mindless awe considered him a reckless unthinking maniac. The only ones who really seemed to get the nature of the calculated maniacal desperation that drove his actions were Anton Greene and that Russian tank crew who'd rammed a mech's legs off after their tank's cannon was removed by a laser, and they'd gone off to get uproariously drunk together and compare notes. Since Dandel's alcohol tolerance could be best described as 'One wine cooler, two wine cooler, three wine cooler, floor', he'd politely excused himself.

The sad thing was that despite the roar of crowd noise, this was the closest thing to a quiet moment to think he'd been able to get since being given his new assignment. The techies were absolutely confident that they'd be able to get at least three of the destroyed Battlemasters operational again, and the decision had been made to employ them, along with Natalie's Star League era mech, as a single unit. The assignment of the other two slots in the lance had been based entirely on piloting skill, and somehow it had been decided that he would be the best maniac to ride herd as the officer in charge of the selected pilots, despite having dropped a crane on the one, and the other reflexively looking to Natalie for direction. Still, it was difficult to fault the decision to give Jankowski a step up in ride after the decoy run he'd made to draw the aerospace assets from the Battle of LA into an epic SAM trap. And there was something frankly unnatural about Brox, if it wasn't decades early, Dandel would have pegged him as a Manei Domini upgrade, but he hadn't twitched at any of the subtle hints given, or noticeably tried to murder him afterward when off of the sparring mat.

"Excuse me? Aren't you Tony Dandel" His ruminations were interrupted by the arrival of a young lady (entirely too young),

wearing a short dress(entirely too short), invading his personal space(*entirely* too closely). He quickly became aware that the US Army Mess Dress uniform, while possessed of a number of qualities, was tragically not engineered to conceal the rapid involuntary redistribution of blood flow.

"Why yes miss, and you might be?" He inquired, while frantically trying to open the distance between them.

"I'm Olivia, and I just wanted to express how grateful I was for everything you've done for your country." Unencumbered by any sense of shame or propriety, she rapidly backed him into a corner out of sight of the main floor.

"Well, I really appreciate that, now if you'll excuse me, I-yeerrrk!" He desperately grabbed for her hand before it could make it's way anywhere more inappropriate.

An amused voice interrupted the proceedings, causing the two to freeze in place. "Now Sally, I really don't think that you want to introduce your new boyfriend to your father by getting caught ravishing him in the ballroom.

Frantically looking for rescue, Tony turned his head to see what was clearly a female member of the Secret Service shaking her head. Rapidly adding two and two to arrive at the square root of sixteen, in a blur of motion he somehow ended up cowering behind his new mistress and savior, stuttering "You're, you're Sally Ryan."

"And I'm Gwendolyn Merritt, it's my job to keep this young hoyden safe and off the evening news. What did I tell you Sally?"

Foiled, Sally readjusted her dress to cover the bits she'd 'inadvertently' exposed "I have to wait until I'm eighteen if I don't want you ratting me out to dad. I just wanted to get him used to the idea a little."

"And I get to try him out first." Turning to take in the lieutenant's look of horrified betrayal, she confided "Don't worry, you're too young, but I do want to have a go at that Major Lewis if you could

introduce me?"

"Umm sure, just give me a sec." Frantically scribbling Lewis's number on a cocktail napkin, he thrust it at her, before beating a cowardly retreat. "It was nice meeting both of you, sorry, I think I hear your father calling me Olivia, Byeeeeeee!" His voice dopplered off as he attempted to set a new land speed record for Mess Dress.

Sally looked hopefully towards her guard/confidant/surrogate older sister, as she said "So, Major Lewis? This means I don't have to give you first shot after all?"

"Dear, Lewis is more than a little gay. But this gives me an excuse to coordinate with him to try to get that poor ball of nerves laid and unwound a little. Besides, if I don't take the edge off, he won't do anything for you."

Blissfully unaware of the doom being plotted behind him, after nearly bowling over a senator and two congressmen, Dansel managed to stop himself before running headfirst into the President, and his mouth took off without any intervention from the brain. "Mr. President, sir, it's an honor to be here, and I would just like to take this opportunity to volunteer for whatever off-world mission where you think I might be able to make a contribution."

Even without the quiet word that Andrea Price had whispered in his ear, Dansel's disheveled appearance and panicked expression, along with his eldest daughter cheerfully waving from the direction he'd come provided more than enough of the story for an old hand at intelligence analysis to come to the correct conclusion. "So, I see you've met my daughter."

"Umm yes, sir. Mr. President. She's a , uh, that is, she has... she's very impressive sir. Mr. President."

It was actually a relief for Jack Ryan to be able to deal with a problem so mundane, especially when he knew the Secret Service was there to ensure matters didn't get out of hand for his little girl. So he found himself unable to resist tweaking the poor young officer just a little more "Well, I see you seem to have escaped with your virtue

intact. Don't worry son, I should be able to get you clear for at least four months."

"Sir, thank you sir. Drat! I mean Mr. President."

"Go on, see if you can find a life-threatening situation or two to calm your nerves, you've spent enough time here." Watching the young man depart with a renewed sense of purpose, he was unable to stop himself from muttering "that kid really needs to get laid" before the implications of what he'd said caught up with him.

White House
Washington D.C.
December 19, 2005/3020

"-And in the news for the nation's capital, it seems that the infamous Lieutenant Dansel has foiled an armed robbery and three muggings this last night. When asked about the spurt of uniformed vigilanteism, he only replied 'Orders' before leaving the scene."

Looking up into his daughter's glare, President Ryan rhetorically asked "How was I supposed to know he would take it literally?"

Strana Mechty
Nova Cat Enclave
December 28, 2005/3020

Sa-Khan Lucian Carns came awake with a startled gasp. Where most visions were clouded and cloaked in metaphor to the point of near-uselessness, this one had been astoundingly direct and to the point.

A group of squabbling children in the colors of the Scavenger Lords sat in a playground fighting over broken toys, encouraged by a robed adult that spurred them on to new heights of viciousness from the shadows. The assembled might of the Clans bore down on them in

the form of their chosen avatars with Carns among them as the Nova Cat, nearly in position to strike their unsuspecting targets, when a new armored figure stepped from the darkness behind the robed figure, and placed itself in their path.

"Turn back" it said, and began to advance fearlessly upon the seventeen animals now milling about in confusion. The Ice Hellion leaped toward it, only to be cleaved in twain by a sword suddenly appearing in the mans hand. The Goliath Scorpion lashed out with its stinger, only to have it deflected off of a shield that materialized from nowhere, embossed with a Bronze Eagle.

At that, the fight descended to the level of a massive brawl, Carns hanging back and watching as the others attempted to bring the man down by sheer weight of numbers. As the fight went on, the man lost his sword, then his shield, then had his armor removed piece by piece as he continued to tear apart his rapidly dwindling opponents. In the background, two of the children hand in hand snuck up on the robed figure before stabbing it in the back as it watched the fight, and led the others in dismembering its body.

The Clans had now been reduced to the Wolf, the Jaguar, and the Falcon. With a viciousness unseen before, the man thrust his arm into the Jaguar's mouth as it attempted to bite him, and withdrew it holding the beasts tongue. As it frantically pawed at its muzzle, he reached out to grab the Falcon, and shoved it bodily into the dying Jaguar's nether orifice. This needless brutality cost him, as the Wolf cleanly bit through his right arm at the elbow. Snarling, he turned and sought the Wolf's throat with his own teeth, as its scrabbling paws tore bloody strips from his body.

Soon, the Wolf's struggles ceased, and the man gently closed its eyes before letting loose a howl of triumph over a worthy foe, that Carns somehow knew was only meant for the fallen Wolf. Turning to face him directly, the man said "In another time, the Nova Cat would have rediscovered its oath and purpose. For that reason only, you may choose your fate."

Having said that, he turned and walked towards a school building that arose from the ground, shepherding the now contrite children

before him. SaKhan Carns, now a child himself, stared after them in confusion as the world dissolved into mist.

Carns faithfully transcribed the events of the dream, then turned to his sketchbook, and began attempting to capture the exact appearance of the battle-scarred man, somehow certain that it was important. A few minutes later, his comm chimed with an arriving signal from Khan Leroux. He answered it, saying "You received a vision as well, Quiaff?"

"Aff. One man, or in the context of the vision one power, standing against the Clans. I will be calling a Conclave in the morning to share word of this vision, and determine if any other members of our Clan have been granted further illumination."

"Seyla" With that, Leroux broke the connection, and Carns turned back to his sketching. Whatever decision might be reached, he knew that he had no intention of standing in the way of these Bronze Eagles when they came for the Smoke Jaguars and Jade Falcons, and he gave an involuntary shudder before forcing the thought from his mind.

Clarkson: Welcome to Top Gear. Today we very special episode for you all.

Hammond: We are having a race.

May: I know we have these car vs. some thing or other on a regular basis but this is really is a special one.

Clarkson: We have a real life battlemech. A Stinger to be precise.

applause

Hammond: How did we manage to manage to get a hold of a mech?

Clarkson: I exerted my not inconsiderable charm and influence

May: You groveled

Hammond: You groveled

Clarkson: So lets get to the race

Downtown Berlin

Clarkson: The race will be from Berlin to Paris.

Hammond: now they wont let us actuality pilot the Battlemech ourselves much to Jeremy's disappointment. Stop making that face Clarkson they're still not going to let you drive it.

Clarkson: So to pilot the Stinger, from the German army have Hauptmann Krause of the German First Panzer-I mean Armored, its called Armored now. The First Armored Division.

Hammond: to defend the honor of the car we have a proud British car, the Ariel Atom driven by... Captain Slow.

May: Yes I will be trying to beat the German Army to Paris. In a car

with no window doors, walls, or a windshield.

Clarkson: Or padded seats.

May: It doesn't even have padded seats!?! *hand head in despair*

Hammond: Now on the face of it this doesn't seem fair, the Atom twice as fast as the Stinger. However the Stinger had the advantage of not needing those pesky road and what not so it can go in a strait line, nor does it need to refuel.

Clarkson: And it has those insane jump jets that will let it go over any obstacles that the Atom would need to go around. So lets begin

watching the Atom and Stinger recede in the distance

Clarkson: Did we tell the French why there's going to be a German Battlemech charging over their borders into Paris?

Guardian Defense Industries Private Test Range
47km outside Las Vegas, Nevada
United States of America
April 9, 2006/3021

James Masterson stroked his goatee, as was his personal ritual when he was satisfied with something, with a wide smile on his face. Slowly, he stepped up to the podium and spared a single glance to the large large unwieldy box shaped launcher mounted on the modified Patriot tractor in front of him.

"Hello everyone. Today we are about to see the first demonstration of the new Medium Range Missile system. This weapons system would have been created by the Draconis Combine about fourty odd years from now, but as you can see, we've beaten them to the punch. Using the same loading systems found in the SRM and LRM systems built by the Inner Sphere, and making use of their own unguided Light Antitank Rockets, we have managed to create a export weapons system using entirely Inner Sphere technology that along with our Rocket Launcher packs and the Improved Rifle System will establish 'Motherload'," There was a slight laugh in the crowd, "As a force to be respected in military weapons systems and development, all without showing our true capability to Inner Sphere. Not only that, but with these weapons systems we will have a way to draw in Inner Sphere capitol for our international intelligence and defense efforts all without drawing undue attention by flooding the market with Earth mined gold bullion. It will also provide our spooks with the perfect excuse to go to every end of the Inner Sphere, with the excuse that they are building factories. In other words, friends, we're going to get rich and we're going to help our world in the process. In the spirit of our noble mission, these launchers will be produced under the Victory brand name. So, without further a due, I now officially present, the Victory-40, the first fully functional MRM system ever created. Take 'er away, boys!"

In a single moment of fire and fury, the weapon spat fourty unguided missiles at a large target almost three and a half kilometers down range. The unguided missiles flew straight and true with just over just under three quarters of them striking the target. Twenty seven of

directly impacted the target while the rest of them just missed, flying slightly above to to the sides. Those that did hit hit, violently ripped into the foot thick piece of high carbon steel, crudely cut into the shape of a Warhammer BattleMech.

As the fire and dust cleared the end results were apparent. The target had almost been sawed in half by the volley. One of the arms had been completely blown clear, laying almost while the steel body was twisted and badly holed. Several seconds later the launcher fired one again, and over three dozen missiles were one again screaming down range. Again the majority of them struck the target. This time when the fire cleared all that was left was a pair of stubby legs and a barely recognizable hunk of twisted metal.

He smiled and turned back from the large television screen that was broadcasting the test.

"Unfortunately I'm not going to have a test for our Multiple missile Launcher project as we're still working out the kinks of loading two different sized missiles into a single launcher, but even without them, we have one hell of a product here. We're going to blow them away!"

**National Training Center
Fort Irwin
California
Earth
3 May 2006**

On the parade field, battalions of soldiers stood in formation. In from of each battalion formation stood their commanding officers and the guidon bearer. Each guidon proclaimed their battalion's name and function, be they infantry, tanker, or pilot. And in front of them to either side of the podium were the bleachers, holding observers, reporters, family members, as well as the "civilians consultants" attached to them. At the podium stood their commanding officer, facing his people to address them.

"Soldiers if the GDI First Combat Brigade," their CO spoke. "Welcome to the Fort Irwin National – or should I say International – Training Center. For those of you who don't know me, I am your new commanding officer, Brigadier General Don Davis. And no, I am not the guy from the TV show."

There was a rumbling of chuckles from the assembled soldiers and audience.

"This is a historical moment in the history of our world," General Davis continued. "The First Brigade is the first truly multinational army this world has ever seen. We are not just a coalition of forces thrown together from the units of national militaries. We are a truly integrated force, combining soldiers from many nations together from top to bottom, the best of the best our world has to offer.

"Look at the man or woman next to you and you have a very good chance of seeing a fellow soldier whose nationality may not be the same as yours, whose culture may even have been opposed to yours not more than a year ago. They may not even have been born on the same planet as you. But know this; we are united as never before, united to defend our poor planet from the forces of a hostile and greedy universe that thinks nothing of wiping out civilizations for momentary gain.

"And that brings us here today. In little more than a month, we leave this planet we call 'Earth' for the long journey to strike at the world that tried to invade us last November. Yes, it's dangerous and risky. Yes, some people have argued against it. And yes, our training is being rushed faster than any of us would really like. But our mission is vital and was given the go ahead anyway. So on our shoulders, your shoulders rest the future of our planet. How we perform on Antallos will influence how Earth deals with the rest of the universe for all time. Whether we open relations with the powers of the Inner Sphere or 'turtle up' and give up the stars will depend entirely on how well you fight.

"So for the next four weeks, train as best you can. Train as if your lives, the lives of your loved ones, and the lives of every person on this planet will depend on how good you are, because in a way, they do."

* * *

"Okay, people, listen up! For those of you who don't know me, my name is Dana Zumross. But for the next four weeks, you can call me 'Ma'am' or 'boss' or 'God'. I'm in charge of making sure your training is as realistic as possible without actually using live ammo or killing any of you outright. But if any of you piss me off, you'll wish you had been killed out right? Understood?"

There was some incoherent mumbling from the assembled soldiers.

"I can't hear you! I said, IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?"

"YES, MA'AM!"

"Good. Now intel says that primary resistance will be from a company of mostly light and medium battlmechs along with whatever forces Port Krin can scrounge up. So naturally the question came up, how do you properly simulate an OpFor when all the mechs available are being used on one side? And they have to be on one side, otherwise you can't properly train combined arms with them. So here's the solution."

At Zumross' signal, a... thing rolled up behind her. It looked like it had begun life as a tank, but the turret had been removed and replaced with a wood and steel mockup of a mech. It was practically wrapped mummy-like with MILES sensors.

"And this is your enemy, people. This 'mech' will simulate just about any function a real mech can do short of jumping around. And despite its appearance, it is NOT cheap. So for you mech jocks and vehicle drivers, there will be no ramming, no physical attacks, and definitely no Death from Above shenanigans. The only physical attacks will be by infantry practicing the emplacement of satchel charges. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Good. So in accordance with a tradition that goes back at least to the Roman Empire, the OpFor will be for the purposes of this exercise be tougher than what's expected at Antallos. That means there will be a *battalion* of our faux mechs with substantial infantry support defending our little fake city in the desert. The 'mechs' will also be simulating heavies and assaults of random models."

A subliminal groan ran through the crowd.

"But wait! It gets better," Dana said with a smile. "The OpFor mechs will also be armed with what our best guess estimates of what Star League technology is capable of. Oh, and the heat simulator for them has been disabled as well, but yours hasn't." A hand went up. "Yes, Captain?"

"Miss Zumross," the Captain, an Air Cavalry pilot by his insignia, began. "I understand about training harder, but aren't you going a bit overboard here?"

"Not at all, Captain," Dana said blithely. "Just think of it like a video game if it helps. And on this planet, the game computer is always a cheating bastard anyway."

Outpost
Kirchbach Prefecture
Rasalhague Military District
Draconis Combine
18 February 3021

Baron Ozama Joe, Lord of planet Outpost, piloted his *Pheonix Hawk* down the cracked and grass infested highway. He was tempted to throttle his mech up into a run, but that would mean leaving most of his loyal retainers behind.

Following in his wake were the three light mechs of his lance, piloted by his loyal Samurai warriors. And strung out on the road behind the Samurai were the light tanks and APCs of Outpost's planetary militia battalion. It almost looked like a parade.

But this was no fanciful outing today. Ahead of Baron Joe was a column of dense, black smoke rising above the intervening forest. Its size and thickness told the Baron that the town was probably lost, burning to the ground even as he all but ran towards it. Baron Joe cursed the militia for slowing him down, but some instinct told him that he would need them. And if he could not save the town, perhaps he could punish the raiders.

Baron Joe rounded a bend in the road and the forest opened up, bringing the township into view. It was as bad as he had feared; every building he could see seemed to be on fire. In fact, it was worse than he had feared; bodies carpeted the road between him and the town, gunned down as they fled or worse. His eyes skipped past bloody and naked bodies.

Fury filled Baron Joe, and he hit the button to broadcast on the common bands.

"Cowards!" he shouted into the ether as his people deployed around him. "Cowards and dishonorable dogs! You slay the helpless for no better reason than your own amusement! Come out and face my righteous wrath!"

"Weeeeell, since you put it so pretty, how can I refuse," a man's voice answered, laughing. A *Quickdraw* stepped out of the wall of fire and smoke. "I'm Ryan. Redjack Ryan. Maybe you heard of me?"

"Redjack Ryan?" Baron Joe repeated. "Then I will have the pleasure of taking your head and boasting how I defeated you in single combat."

"Ha! In your dreams, Baron," Ryan jeered. Around him, more mechs began stepping out of the flames, a great many more mechs. "Not that you'll ever dream again, I'll wager."

Nykvarn
Trondheim Prefecture
Rasalhague District
Draconis Combine
1 April 3021

Bullets flew back and forth down the street. Private Niles Strondheim ducked down behind the shell of a truck that he was using as cover as a stream of bullets whizzed past. Beside him, a young mother cradled her injured child, neither able to move to safety and medical help because of all the gunfire raging around them.

"Sergeant!" Strondheim shouted over the woman's head as he loaded his last magazine into his weapon. "I'm running low on ammo!"

"Yeah?" Strondheim's squad leader shouted back, popping up to let off a burst of rifle fire. He ducked back down in time to avoid the rounds spanging off his cover. "Well look on the bright side! So must they!"

"Who the fuck are these guys?" Strondheim asked after firing another burst.

"Hey, I'm just a mushroom," the Sergeant answered after firing another burst of his own. "I'm just kept in the dark and fed shit like everyone else. But I think these guys are pirates."

"This deep into the Combine?" Strondheim said, shocked enough that he forgot to pop out and shoot another few rounds.

"Yeah, go figure," the Sergeant said. His eyes flicked over to something behind Strondheim. "Oh, fuck."

Strondheim turned around to see a *Firestarter* looming over them, and had just enough time to register that it wasn't painted in militia or DCMS colors before he and everyone else behind the truck were engulfed in flames.

Herndon
Kagoshima Prefecture
Pesht District
Draconis Combine
20 May 3021

It was pure luck that they could arrive as soon as they did, thought Chu-sa Pierre Mbutu bitterly as he surveyed the burned out remains of the city. A routine troop movement of Pesht Regulars had been at Pesht's Nadir jump point – only one jump away! - when word had come of the attack on Herndon. And still they had arrived too late, the honorless dogs who had done this having long since departed via pirate point.

A man in the ragged remains of a uniform was brought before him. He was burned and badly injured and had to lean on crutches to remain upright. He also appeared to be missing several body parts.

"Honored Chu-sa," the man said, making a credible attempt to bow. "I am Corporal Li Audrey, senior surviving member of the Herndon planetary militia."

"Report!" Mbutu barked harshly.

"Yes, honored Chu-sa," Audrey said. "Five days ago, the capitol city of Herndon, Hernopolis was hit by an estimated two battalions of mechs and supporting infantry forces."

"Two battalions?" Mbutu said incredulously. That was a force large enough to conquer a minor backwater like Herndon, not just merely raid. But if it was too large to be a raid, it was also far too small to

hold a world in the middle of the mighty Draconis Combine!
"Impossible!"

"As you say, honored Chu-sa," Audrey replied apologetically. "But that was what was reported. And I saw at least a company of mechs with my own eyes, and evidence of many more. They struck like lightning and slaughtered indiscriminately for two days before leaving as suddenly as they had come."

"And why do you live when your brothers and betters lie struck down?" Mbutu asked pointedly. "Why have you done less than give your life in defense of your people?"

"Oh, honored Chu-sa," Audrey said miserably. "I was buried alive by a fallen building late in the battle and was not dug out until after the raiders have left. I would have committed seppuku to cleanse my shame, but what little honor I have left demanded that I report what I know."

"And do you have anything more to report, Corporal?" Mbutu asked.

"Only that the leader of the raiders claimed to be someone named 'Redjack Ryan'."

"Huh," Mbutu grunted in surprise. Grudgingly, he nodded. "You have done well, Corporal." He took out a pen and began writing out a memo on his notepad.

"Thank you, honored Chu-sa."

"Take this to my secretary," Mbutu said, handing the memo to Audrey. "She will see to it that you have an appropriate second for your seppuku."

Audrey took the memo with his left hand. He used the stump of his right to salute as best he could. "Thank you, honored Chu-sa," he said again. There was no irony in his voice.

Imperial Palace
Luthien

Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
25 June 3021

"Unacceptable!" shouted Takashi Kurita, Coordinator and unquestioned ruler of the Draconis Combine. He glared at his advisors who looked on with various mixtures of cowering fear, zen-like stoicism, and even outright concern. The Coordinator pointed to the holographic map of the Combine. Four points of light pulsed a deathly white among the Combine's red stars. "Outpost! Nykvarn! Herndon! And now Linqing! I want this upstart pirate and his band of degenerates dead!"

"Honored Dragon, it is not so easy," spoke up a nervous Kester Hsiun. He was the Warlord of the Pesht District and had the misfortune of being on Luthien when the worlds under his responsibility were being attacked. It looked for all the galaxy like dereliction of duty. "This Redjack Ryan has been restricting his attacks to minor worlds with garrisons that he knows will be inadequate to stop him. Simply responding to an attack means that our heroic forces arrive long after he leaves. Trying to spread our forces out to enough worlds to catch him would mean that we would spread ourselves too thin to destroy him. And we can't concentrate our forces ahead of him if we don't know where he will strike next."

"Actually," the much feared Director of the ISF, Subhash Indrahara spoke up thoughtfully, staring at the holo map. "I think I can guess where Ryan will be in four or five week's time."

"How would you do that?" Hsiun asked, clearly mystified.

"Look at the placement of each attacked world and consider the timing," Indrahara said. "The worlds are placed in a nearly straight line four jumps apart. Accounting for the extra recharge time required for using pirate points and the transit times of Dropships, that easily explains the six week intervals between attacks. Honored lords, Redjack Ryan is going somewhere and the raids on our worlds are merely supply runs to restock on consumables."

"And where," Takashi began, "do you think he is going?"

"Antallos," Indrhar said, smiling.

"Port Krin?" Hsiun grunted, now showing a bit of outrage and anger himself. "We should have cleaned up that pirate's nest years ago. But why would he be heading there?"

"I can only speculate," Indrhar said. "But I think he's heard rumors of this 'Motherlode' and is going for a piece of the lostech prize."

"I thought you told me that this 'Motherlode' was a myth," Takashi said dangerously.

"What I told you, Honored Coordinator, was that I *believed* it to be a fabrication of the Port Krin Administrator," Indrhar said smoothly. "It would seem that Redjack Ryan would beg to disagree."

"Then if Ryan is heading to Port Krin," Takashi said, "the Dragon will meet him there and show him the error of his ways before he can flit off again. What forces do we have that can meet him there?"

Royal Palace
New Avalon
New Avalon Combat Region
Crucis March
Federated Suns
30 June 3021

"So, Port Krin? Are you sure?"

"Yes, your highness. The DCMS is making little secret of its troop movements however hard they try to hide the fact that they've been attacked in their own back yard. And Redjack Ryan seems to be deliberately drawing a straight line to the place. It fits."

"Hmm... maybe we should be looking into these Motherlode rumors some more. My people over at the NAIS are going gaga over that little computer they got last week. One of them is even proclaiming that it's 'alien technology'."

"So what do you intend, Highness?"

"I'm thinking we need to do a little recon in force. I hear Port Krin's nice this time of year..."

Port Krin
Antallos
Periphery
1 August 3021

It was all supposed to have been so simple, Vorax thought miserably, slumped behind his desk. Out there was a rich and primitive world ripe for the taking. Just go in with a big army, take over, and ship loot and slaves back to Port Krin. Pure profit.

The first few months had ticked by and no word had come. But that had been all right. From what he understood, Motherlode was eight jumps away, and it would take time to beat the local populace into submission. And then of course, another eight weeks would have to go by for the first returning Dropships to arrive.

Except the months had kept on ticking by and no one had returned. Then rumors had begun circulating that suggested Vorax had conned everyone out of money and armed forces or worse, that *Vorax* had been the one to be conned. Vorax of course, had assured everyone that Motherlode was indeed real and that they would be hauling in the riches shortly.

And then Precentor Long had shown up one day and asked if his superiors should expect an attack on Terra soon. At Vorax mystified expression, Long had shown him two images. One was the one Captain Benson had given him of Motherlode. The other featured Terra. Ever since then Vorax had been waiting for the axe to fall. The only question was who would be holding the handle...

His desk communicator beeped.

"What is it?" Vorax demanded.

"Administrator, this is the Spaceport command," came the reply.

"Uh...we're picking up inbound Dropships. *A lot* of inbound Dropships."

January 4th, 2006
Washington, DC
Earth

Daniel Morris sat down in front of Mary Pat. "Ma'am."

"Colonel Morris." She eyed the man, still looking younger than his records would indicate. She had this idea and she needed a real cowboy to pull it off, but she couldn't spare Chester, and well, she remembered the NSA and DIA had a few of their own wild boys, who went off the reservation of their normal duties to make some points. She gazed into the blue green eyes of the brown haired man in front of her, and noted his wary curiosity.

"Ah, just Mr." The wry grin on the man's face caused a slight smile on her face. "I'm retired, remember?"

"Oh, your medical retirement has been ... reconsidered. Bill over at Meade was quite helpful." Mary Pat smiled. She noted his slight quirk of an eyebrow, and his settling in.

"I... see. Then why am I not at Meade?" He shrugged, and sipped at the coffee placed in front of him, and added. "It's not like I'm rather fond of your people... or did you forget?"

Mary Pat had to laugh. Shaking her head, she grinned. "Which is exactly why I asked Meade for you. Not only are you as wild as I was, in the good old days, you don't MIND working on your feet, nor operating totally on your own, and not only illegal, but disavowed if needs be."

"I... see. Let me guess. You read my file, know I know a bit about the BT universe, and can find more who do know more, and you want me to run ops in the Sphere?" Daniel shook his head. "Ma'am, no offense, but I'm LONG out of that game. Married and well, I like my current career."

"I know. Which is another reason why I selected you. You're not going to make and run stations. Very specific mission, Colonel." She

handed over a file. "Operation Tomb Raider."

Daniel blinked as he accepted the file, pausing as he heard the name. "... So... ka. You want me to get the ruins of the Star League's caches!" he muttered, as he opened the file.

"Yes. Can you?" She let him brose the file and then he shook his head.

"Not with this. Give me a week, and MY discretion to assemble the team. I assume the mission requirements are totally covert." The man flipped though the papers again, shaking his head.

"Of course... and for someone who was out..." She watched as he winced.

"Well... what can you do? Once..." Daniel stood up, smiling.

"Always. Soon as you have YOUR op plan, Colonel, call me. Any time. Oh, if possible, make your team international?"

Daniel shook her hand and raised an eyebrow. "GDI?"

"Yes." She smiled. "Let's not totally piss everyone off... this time, Samurai?"

Daniel had the good grace to wince. "I didn't TRY to..."

"Right, right. Off with you, I have more to do." Mary Pat watched as the man strode out of the room.

**January 15th, 2006
Joint Defence Space Research Facility
Pine Gap, Australia
Earth**

Alexander Marius eyed the packet he'd been given, turning the photos and archival documents over in his hands. Most of it was derived from the fictional works of battletech- but some of the documents

contained testimonies from debriefed mercs, and technical specifications from actual study of technology. Power diagrams, insertion schematics, and more all stared him in the face- but Alexander was looking beyond them. The basic outline of this operation was already in place, but it lacked a lot of details.

"It's unsettling," he muttered, putting the packet back in the envelope, and making for the fruit table. Something sweet to calm his nerves- Alexander had served in MI6 for years, but he had mostly worked in archival retrieval, which in turn had operated on his home soil. This conference was the first time he'd been out of the country in nearly a decade.

Tasting the cool sweetness of a blueberry tart, Alexander set his mind to the details of the Operation, reviewing the facts. Aside from the markedly simple matter of insertion, establishing a trail of credentials from Alpheratz all the way across the IS to the designated target of Helm, there was also the matter of getting in to the Star League cache, if it even existed. While he'd heard talk of stealing decoder rings, or hacking their way in, there was nothing really definite- everything was in the air until they had real information. That too was unsettling.

"You look pensive," said a voice. Alexander inclined his head slightly, watching Daniel- both the operation commander, and an old acquaintance. "What's worrying you Alexander?"

"This whole mission? There's too many things that can go wrong, and none of the information we've got has actually been corroborated," he answered truthfully. "At least in retrieval, I could count on having the target thoroughly researched before my team acted- but this... there's too many things that can go wrong."

"Well, fortunately that's why we have you," Daniel said with a smile. He took a sip from his wine glass, which he spent a moment tasting, gingerly. "They want us to pull off this operation by the seat of our pants. And you're here to make sure that we don't make any bad decisions- a voice of reason amongst cowboys."

"Is that what they're calling you now?"

"Better then what they called you- mailmen was it? What did you do in retrieval- I know you weren't out hunting documents," replied Daniel. "But I suppose it's not my place to ask. Hey. You want to go brief the eggheads? I tried to give them the lowdown, but I think they were arguing over particles or something."

"I suppose- though I do have one question that I don't see strictly outlined in the packet before I do," requested Alexander, turning to watch the myriad collection of spooks and operatives mingle among their fellows.

"Our exit vector is an Invader class jumpship that we procured from the pirate invasion- the engineers are working her over, but she'll be on permanent standby for the two to three weeks we're in the system. GDI wanted to foist a Merchant class jumpship off on us, but the eggheads managed to talk them into actually giving what we need- it'll be home for the next three years, so we need the extra weight."

"And our planetary ingress/egress?"

"A Union dropship we swiped from the pirates, fast, reliable, and with enough cargo to carry what our front mission mandates."

"Aren't those hideously cramped?"

"Our techs are hard at work at this very moment refitting it- stripping out most of the mech bays, adding new computers to cut back on space- when they're done with it, it'll be a whole new dropship," Daniel replied merrily. "Just a bit of paint, and we'll be good to go."

Alexander paused, pondering. Wasn't there... oh.

"Wouldn't the Seeker the Canadians captured be easier to use?" he asked, musing. "I heard such stories- apparently some sort of martial artist lawyer managed to subdue the dropship crew along with a group of coast guard. The report was all very fantastical."

"The Canadians have a Seeker?" Daniel exclaimed. He pulled out a cellphone. "Give me a moment."

"Take all the time you need," Alexander replied. A moment later Daniel was off the phone and grinning.

"We have our ride," he said.

"And the farming?" Alexander prompted.

"GDI doesn't just want us to recover the core- they need us to make as much damn money as we can while doing it. The Canadians are sending the Seeker over uh-" Daniel threw a quick glance at his watch. "Now, give or take a few minutes."

"Typical of them. The military, not the Canadians. Anyways old bean, why me? We've never worked together, and well... you're reputed to be... a lone wolf, I think is the way it's mentioned." Alexander commented with a slight smile.

"Well, MP wanted it to be internat, and I heard of you, and well, it made Sir Cyril happy." Daniel smiled slightly. "Plus, your repuation yourself... well, chum, it's simple. I know I'm a wild one in the field. So, I looked for someone as my XO, who'd counter that. You fit the bill too well. Go explain to our geeks what we're about. I'll handle the few headed our way." Daniel grinned, and nodded at one person headed their way.

March 5th, 2006/3021

**Experimental Jump Project - R&D HQ
Earth**

"And I told you that it's not possible. There's all sorts of space jump out there- whether you jump through a nebula or a sun, it will fry you just the same. There's no way to account for that chance," barked Tomino Su, former navigator of the Tiger Tiger. "I know you science types want it to desperately be possible, and to be frank, I'd love it too. But there's just too much risk."

"Nebula... Tomino, we can *see* our jump target from here. There's nothing there, and the chances that there were, across deep space, are well," countered Eric Riker of the GDI science division. "Let me

put it this way- we've run the math. For every time you run into an object in deep space, about five hundred jumpships explode when attempting to jump to the standard points because of debris there. Now since the IS, for all its technological decline, hasn't lost any jumpships to this sort of thing, it sets a precedent."

"What sort of precedent?"

"That it's damned unlikely. We should at least try- if the field distorts, we can shut it off, no harm done. But with a stable field, it would be worth the risk."

Tomino sighed, turning to look at the work being done to the Tiger Tiger, then nodded.

"You'll take every precaution?" he asked slowly. Riker nodded, and handed him a clipboard with a mission approval notice on it.

"It's already been approved- we'll be jumping the Scout- it's the least valuable in material terms- unmanned. If we lose it, we're down some resources, but no loss that we can't replace. If we succeed..."

"Riches, and all that jazz?" asked Tomino. Riker laughed.

"Nah. Just time. Most precious commodity of all," he answered truthfully. "You've got about a week to get ready before we're heading up to orbit to try this plan."

"Your plan. Hope it works," Tomino replied.

It did, for a given value of 'worked'. Though they had been delayed for an additional week because some of the scientists had wanted to run the calcs through one of the military supercomputers. But with that out of the way, it had been a simple matter to head out on board the Methusela, the Merchant class jumpship that would be taking the long way. Time being of the essence, they didn't get to see the scout head off, though the last reports they received were positive- for a given value of positive, as apparently there had been some minor field instabilities, probably a result of the little objects floating

around the kupier belt. But the fluctuations were within the specified tolerances, so the mission was given the go-ahead.

As the Methusela made its way to the target system, the team of researchers had time to muse over the applications of this use of jumping- as well as their understanding of KF physics, or lack thereof. Working within the framework that the drive technicians understood they could account for most of the possibilities that had been known, but this was new territory. If it worked, it might help to confirm certain theories of *how the drive did what it did, which would hopefully set Earth onto the path to building their own, not just copying that of the IS.*

But all those things were the future, and as the Methusela reverted to realspace on the edge of an unnamed system on the very edge of the Grantville cluster, they all ceased to matter. The Scout was waiting for them, intact and serenely sitting as though it had done nothing like violating a dozen of the basic tennents of physics. Though there was, as always, still work to be done. The Scout appeared intact, but only with a closer inspection would they really be able to determine the 'level' of that success- and which of the wild theories were accurate.

"I bet the bloody drive's gone missing," Tomino grouched, turning back to his work. "And don't you even start."

Riker said nothing, but silently chuckled even as the Tiger Tiger approached the Scout's docking ring. There was much work to be done yet.

April 12th, 2006
Jumpship Avante Garde
Sol Nadir
Departure

Tomb Raider was, finally, on its way. After a hurried three months of exercises, training, and outfitting, Operation Tomb Raider was officially Go. With three dropships loaded to the brim with equipment, and the Avante Garde's own holds carrying sizable cargo, there was little else that could be done to prepare. It was time to launch.

Alexander Marius, the mission's XO was currently on the vessels bridge, watching the remaining preparations with trepidation. But all his doubts became but a memory as the viewports opened, and the brightness of space invaded the darkened bridge. Here and there, technicians monitored all manner of readings- some using the ships original systems, while others monitoring via the refitted Earth technology. Words were exchanged, about fusion intermix processes, cargo storage, and other concerns about ship readiness, but none of that mattered to Alexander. Instead, he was focused on his commanding officer, Daniel Morris. While in overall command of this operation, he had been spending more and more time cooped up in his office, going over plans and schematics- stressing far too much over his varied orders, rather than delegating the tasks as he should have. The damn Samurai.

Even on this most momentous of events, the launch, he was absent. But for once, the man was possessed of a proper reason- the need for sleep. Staying awake for seventy two hours had hardly been conducive to his mental processes, and finally, after snapping so hard at one of the younger members of the team, Alexander had felt that it was time to step in. However, facing the Samurai alone was always a daunting prospect, and Alexander knew his rival could well be a stubborn arse. So he had enlisted in aid from the team's medic-Laurentia Clavel.

Laurentia had, prior to being assigned to this mission, served as a member of France's Directorate-General for External Security for

nearly four years. A full doctor, Clavel was also a highly trained soldier and field medic- and had often found herself patching up agents at the DGES's private hospitas- agents who either knew information that was too sensitive to accidentally slip in a public hospital- or whose existence themselves was too sensitive to leave to chance. This mission was her first outside of France- and its importance to her was easy to see. Though none of the expedition showed it, they were all tickled pink to be the first humans to travel outsystem from Earth- or at least what everyone knew to be the 'real' earth, for Terra was vast leagues distant, and more the subject of fiction than anything they knew.

With the aid of Laurentia, and a proper medical diagnosis, Alexander had imposed one step further, and procured the aid of Aiko Morris. While Alexander knew it was a dirty move, he also knew that without the right sort of backing, forcing his friend to let go of all that stress could result in a demoralizing outburst- or worse. Luckily, things had panned out. While Daniel might have been able and of the mind to dissuade Alexander with an order or some other reason, simultaneously doing so in both the presence of his wife and physician would be- and was- significantly more difficult. After a short period of bluster, the man had finally agreed to leave his office and turn in for some much needed sleep. Aiko was, to all of Alexander's knowledge, keeping an eye on him now.

"Sir? We're ready to depart. Are you sure Colonel Morris won't be joining us?" asked the Captain, one Marcus Scott. His uniform crisp, clean, and worn more like a peacock than a man, Captain Scott was a proud, if not charismatic man. Assigned to the mission based on his own record of performance, cultural interests, and affiliation with one agency or another- Alexander couldn't recall, Scott was putting on all the bluster he could to make up for his nervousness. It was understandable given that they were all about to step across into a new frontier, but Alexander couldn't let that nervous energy infect the rest of the crew. He cowed the captain with a glance.

"I'm certain," he said evenly. "I believe we have had permission to jump for the last three minutes, and this mission is long past due to commence. If you would do the honours?"

Scott paused, concern flitting across his visage, but then he caught what Alexander was on about, and gave a crisp nod. Keying the intercomm, he began to speak shipwide.

"This is Captain Marcus Scott, of the Avante Garde. All hands prepare for Hyperspace Transition," he said in a proud, but even voice. He then gestured to the helmsman "Punch it."

The mousey little man nodded, and, after flicking through the various safeties, turned the key that would initiate the jump. At first there was nothing to indicate that there was any change, but then Alexander heard a humming noise, which increased in intensity to a keen whine. And then there was a flash, though whether it came from within or without Alexander didn't know.

What he did know was that they weren't in Kansas anymore.

Outworlds Alliance territory

June 8th, 2006

Rudolpho

Lord Protector Micher Islington was not a happy man in any respect, and this was more evident today than any other. The constant bevy of reports piled in his chambers had shown a recent spike in pirate activity- and if these economic surveys were telling the truth, then the OWA was heading down a difficult path financially, as it tried desperately to pay for the military to combat piracy, while still attempting to stimulate its own fractured economy.

But none of this was what weighed on the Lord Protector's mind, rather it was something new- something different.

"Are they still out there?" he asked quietly, turning to face the numerous screens that showed a single Invader class jumpship hanging serenely in the void. It had arrived approximately thirty minutes ago, sent a single hail requesting to speak with the planetary governor, and then waited. Ominously.

"No signs of movement, and we haven't picked up any further signals from them- I would note, however, that their dishes are pointed in our direction. I suspect they're listening in on the local chatter- though it's unlikely they can decipher our codes," replied one of the technicians nervously. He brought up a closer view of the jumpship, which, despite its obvious state of disrepair, someone had been generous enough to *paint* the thing- and the attending dropships. Each carried an unfamiliar logo. Both the technician and the Lord Protector dearly hoped that it wasn't a pirate logo.

The lord protector took one more look, then sighed, almost deflating.

"Perhaps today is a day in which I'll put my faith in God once again. Hail them, send them coordinates for the spaceport. They can send one ship. Once they're done- and without incident, I hope, then we can see about arranging a meeting," He ordered. "If they're telling the truth, then this could be a boon in disguise- but I have to wonder at what price?"

"Receipt acknowledged, sir. They're undocking the Seeker," said the technician in response. And sure enough, the rounded form of the dropship in question detached from the hull of the Jumpship, ignited its fusion torch engines, and began burning for Rudolpho's orbit. The probe cameras switched to a different angle, monitoring the incoming dropship for any hostile moves. The Seeker class was usually lightly armed, but who knew what changes these... *privateers* might have wrought to it. The scene shifted, then panned out, showing as a trio of ASFs drew up alongside it, escorting in.

Micher nodded, then turned and left the room. His glorious task awaited, all those documents to be filled, all that paperwork to be filed. While he dearly wished for some change to his routine, experience had taught him that jumpships claiming to be from some periphery independent and selling material were usually privateers looking to make a quick buck. And so, the Lord Protector of Rudolpho settled back into his routine.

Such a pity that he would soon long for the comfort of normality. The dropship heading insystem would soon change everything, and if the

Lord Protector was lucky, it wouldn't demolish everything he knew and loved when it did so.

To: PRIORITY - All United Nations Security Council Members; GDI COUNCIL

From: GLOBAL DEFENSE INITIATIVE CENTRAL COMMAND, GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

Sent Date: 2007, February 8, Earth Standard Reckoning

Title: A BRIEF SUMMARY OF GLOBAL DEFENSE INITIATIVE (GDI) ARMED FORCES

The overall GDI Military arm is made up of four separate branches, and two sub-branches. The branches are as follows.

GDI Navy -

The GDI Navy comprises of all FTL capable vessels such as jumpships, armed merchantmen, and warships, along with all non-atmospheric capable support/escort dropships. Any and all small craft based aboard these vessels fall under their direct purview and are treated as the Aerospace 'arm' of the Navy branch itself. They are also responsible for all manned space stations not in direct orbit of a colony planet or moon. The GDI Navy also has a supply 'arm' that uses tanker/transport dropships that are atmospheric capable, and these are the only large craft permitted to it by overall GDI Command. They are permitted ground-side base facilities for their dropships, ASF arm, and small craft, sufficient transportation units for inside these bases, and a security force.

GDI Aerospace Force -

The GDI Aerospace Force comprises of all trans-atmospheric capable small craft capable of flying higher then 3000m - broken into their three arms of Fighters, Bombers, and Supply/Support, all atmospheric capable dropships, and all space stations directly in orbit of a colony planet or moon. While

their primary assets are dropships that require FTL transportation via jump capable vessels, if these vessels are classed as a non-combat jumpship or armed merchantman, the GDI Aerospace Force senior officer is considered to have tactical command over the jumpship or armed merchantman, even if the senior officer of the larger vessel out-ranks the senior on-site dropship commander. They are permitted ground-side base facilities for their dropships, ASF arm, Bomber arm, Supply/Support arm, and small craft, sufficient transportation units for inside these bases, and a security force.

GDI Army -

The GDI Army comprises all infantry units, armored ground units, VTOLs, and atmospheric only small craft not capable of reaching 3000m, based at a colony or outpost. This can range from a 20 person infantry MP unit at an asteroid outpost, to a 30,000 personnel full scale 'open-air' base at a major colony. They operate all classes Battlemechs in GDI, with the exception of any Land-Air Mechs, which fall outside their purview. However during space combat they fall under the distinction of the Aerospace Force if currently based off a dropship, or the Navy if based off any FTL capable vessel, as to provide extra CIWS/PD for these vessels as needed/ordered.

GDI Marine Corp -

The GDI Marine Corp is a sub-branch of the GDI Navy. The GDI Marine Corp comprises of a mix of infantry, armored units, mechanized units, dropships, and all Land-Air Mech units. They operate no standard ASF units due to their unique status in utilizing LAMs. GDI Marines utilize either the lightest or the heaviest combat units due to their rapid-reaction force response requirements. The GDI Marine Corp also has direct purview over any large military water craft at any colony planet or moon. Technically the GDI Marine Corp is considered, as a

whole, a large scale SOC combined arms unit. They are permitted ground-side base facilities for their dropships, LAM arm, ground units, mechanized units, sufficient transportation units for inside these bases, and a security force.

GDI Colony Guard -

The GDI Colony Guard is a sub-branch of both the GDI Navy and the GDI Aerospace Force. They are in charge of all extra-atmospheric law enforcement not directly related to a colony's internal law enforcement establishment, and all orbital/deep space Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. The GDI Colony Guard is also in charge of local space around any colony system's recharging stations or orbital colony clusters. They operate small craft, dropships, and a special dispensation of light, single docking collar, jumpships. All dropships operated by the GDI Colony Guard are modified with Tug attachments.

GDI Special Operations Command -

This branch of the GDI Armed Forces promotes and selects existing officers, warrant officers, and enlisted personnel from the other five branches, and all personnel assigned to GDISOCOM exist outside of their normal chain of command while assigned to GDISOCOM. Each branch of the GDI Armed Forces has its own individual Special Operations Command that is unique and capable of running its own operations, but when the different Special Operations Forces need to work together for an operation, GDISOCOM becomes the joint component command of the operation, instead of a SOC of any one specific branch. The GDISOCOM operates vehicles and vessels across the entire spectrum of available military units, however the number and types of units are classified in this summary.

SUPPLEMENT THE FIRST

Local Space as defined is the 2,000 kilometer sphere, or zone, surrounding a zenith/nadir recharging station or any civilian colony cluster. All vessels entering this zone are to be challenged upon crossing it. Unknown or foreign flagged jumpships are allowed within the zone as long as they submit to an escort or tug.

No unknown or foreign flagged ASFs, except as diplomatic flagged escorts, are allowed within this zone, and are to be escorted out immediately.

Any unknown or foreign flagged armed dropships are to be challenged upon arriving at the zone's border and escorted out as well, excepting diplomatic flagged vessels.

No unknown or foreign flagged warships are allowed within this zone, and failing to heave-to prior to the border is considered a hostile act and will be dealt with in an appropriate measured response per circumstances at the time.

Exception to Local Space border crossings are for ships in distress, seeking temporary refugee (48 hours maximum), or any foreign flagged military allied vessels in both peace and wartime.

All unknown or foreign flagged units of any kind approaching a GDI protected colony, orbital or planetary/lunar based, that is not coming from a zenith or nadir point, at whatever range they are first detected, is presumed to be hostile and will be dealt with immediately in an appropriate response after a single warning to heave-to.

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"Well Jack, its not as bad as I thought. It looks like they thought this

one out rather well. And this is just an initial summary", mumbled Robby Jackson, as he sat back in a lounge chair at Camp David, letting the memo slip back onto the low drink table between the chairs.

"Who are you kidding, I noticed you reading through that naval section several times. You just want to hold it over the heads of the Air Force, and don't try to hide it."

Jack watched with diplomatic non-look to his face as his friend swiveled his head around to glare at him a moment before delivering a tight smile of his own back. And while he knew Robby enough by now to roughly guess what the response was going to be, he had one of his own waiting to dig back with.

"Now would I do something as mean-spirited as that to a sitting Joint Chief?"

"Damn right you would. Only there's two things you might just want to remember at the moment."

Lounging back to enjoy the bliss of getting one over, and permanently at that, over the USAF's dream of becoming the new major power in the Pentagon, Robby didn't bother to reply. Unless the non-committal grunt he gave could be counted as one.

"The first is that, it's a joint operation command, not the USAF who's getting this. Second, we have more dropships than we do jumpships by around a half dozen or so times over. And Robby, how long do you think it's going to take us to get the warships mentioned in this?"

That got the Vice President's attention as he snapped up straight in his chair in shock when it sunk in. Then the glare from earlier came back three times as hot. And while he couldn't actually see it, but just past his shoulder the look was enough to get Andrea Price-Day to cock her eyebrow slightly. One didn't regularly see that reaction coming from the VP.

"You still are pissed about losing the bet on the Colts aren't you."

"Bears should have won. Grossman just had a bad day."

"Jack. I'm not inviting you the next time Cissy makes jambalaya & her cassorole."

"Oh now that's just plain mean Robby."

June 10th, 2006/3021
Halkirk Farmstead, North of Surrey
Outworlds Alliance Territory
Rudolpho

It was, for a given value of beautiful, a beautiful day. The sun was shining down across the world, there were few clouds, and it was particularly hot. Summer was apparently in full swing, but this did little to diminish the enthusiasm of the locals- while the adults plowed the fields using what amounted to hand or horse moved plows and the like, children played here and there. It was both at once rustic and dystopic. As the ground cars began to pull up, Daniel Morris of Earth, representing the New Frontier Trading Company, lay in wait.

There are many kinds of predators, and many brands of prey. The Samurai was a hunter, pure and simple, but on this day he would not be hunting enemies. No, today was a day to hunt something better- alliances. Trade agreements that could enrich their lord- distant Earth, proud Earth. Earth that nobody would believe was Earth. Earth "Well I suppose by the time your world was colonized, the name was up for grabs, eh? Eh?" Earth. Daniel smiled as he surveyed his forces. They were clean and well equipped. They were armed- not with weapons of war, but with knowledge, and a burning desire to sell. Walmart would have been proud, but Walmart wasn't being allowed off world yet.

And then, ah, there was Governor Islington. At least for today he had eschewed his fancy title for a little less of a mouthful. As he made his way through the crowd, Daniel spotted his handful of aids trying to help the locals, no doubt heads of the local communities here to see the show.

"-re you are, Mister Morris. I trust everything is ready and this won't take *too* much time out of my busy schedule," Islington said. The man looked a little puffed up, but after the diplomatic talks the previous day most of his worries had been allayed.

"Not more then this afternoon, no. We've got a couple demonstrations

set up, and the Halkirks have graciously assisted us with the setup. Is everyone here?" Daniel said in turn, surveying the gathered crowd.

"Should be- come, I'll introduce you," he replied, walking off. Daniel smiled a smile familiar to anyone who had ever worked in retail, and trailed after him. "This is Constance Fairweather, she runs the local apothecary, and is representing the town of Maybelle."

"How are you today?" intoned the tall, gaunt looking woman. Clearly there was a lot on her mind, but little will to say it. Daniel shook her hand- indeed, he would be shaking a lot of hands today.

"I am quiet well, but I expect to be considerably better once we have the show on the road- forgive me for saying so, but this looks to be a tough crowd," Daniel postulated, taking in the sights of grizzled farmers here and there, some women, and the occasional child tagging along. Most looked at the metal groundcar-like contraptions that sat in the middle of the corral with either a look of anticipation, or worry.

"You would not be the first to come to this world selling materials and products from some long forgotten periphery state," Constance enunciated sharply. "While you are certainly better outfitted then most, the people have become jaded to the efforts of pr-"

Islington took that moment to step in and shush her, giving her *such* a look. She quited, and began to apologize, but Daniel just shook his head and smiled slightly. More then just words passed between them in that gesture, and it was then that Constance took note of Daniel's ring. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it, and said nothing. But her expression had changed- it was almost hopeful.

As Islington led him away, she looked on, more appraising then anything else, then turned and began talking with her companions.

After her, Daniel was introduced to several more individuals- community heads, doctors, clergymen of all sorts of faiths, and even an engineer or two. Finally, he decided that it was time to get on with the show.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, if you would direct your attention here," he announced, the speaker equipment amplifying his voice so that all could hear. "It's time for the show to start, and we're so very lucky to have the help of young miss Arianna Halkirk, to demonstrate this first article."

From the sidelines her family cheered her on, and the young woman turned the ignition key of the tractor just as she had been taught. As one of the few in this community who had been taught how to pilot groundcars, she had naturally been interested in the workings of this similar, if arcane apparatus. As the machine started up, coughing at first, but then simmering with a deep hum, the crowd looked back and forth in curiosity. Surely this was just a groundcar with really big wheels. But you didn't drive groundcars over the fields- not only did they ruin your soil, but they were wont to break down with all that dust and grit that got into the internals.

But Arianna drove- shifting the gear, she started the tractor moving, and then set it. Then, in an oh so interesting display, she took her hands from the controls- a simple wheel and stick affair, and turned. The crowd hushed as the tractor continued on, travelling unerringly in a straight line. After a moment, she turned and directed it back to the center of the corral, and turned it off. Curtseying, she dismounted and ran to her family, who were all appraise for her.

"That was the M Series Open Tractor, produced by a company called John Deer. Similar to a groundcar, though considerably less expensive in both maintenance and production- they have been built expressly for the task which we shall demonstrate in a moment," explained Daniel. "But before that, I'd like to thank miss Halkirk for her wonderful demonstration- we couldn't have done it without you."

The young woman blushed slightly, and bowed to the applause of the crowd, even if most of them weren't sure what they were applauding.

Then, between Alexander and Clavel, the first of the plows was hooked to the tractor. The Chisel Plow was relatively common- on Earth. But out here, where only horse and hand existed to move such things, it wasn't used or thought of.

"Now I'd like to invite Monseieur Halkirk to demonstrate this next piece- they're his fields, after all, and I want you all to see just how easy it is to learn how to use this equipment."

The man hopped over the fence easily, mounted the tractor in a single vault, and then stared at the control array perplexed. Arianna began to speak, but her father held up a hand. He reached, almost instinctively for the gear shift, and shifted it from the forward to the neutral. Nothing happened, but he was certain he had done something right. Then he tried to turn the key that Arianna had turned earlier, but it wouldn't budge. He held up his hand again, requesting that no one interfere. Then he depressed the key, and turned.

The engine roared to life, and with it the crowd surged into applause. Then, he moved the shift lever to the forward position- and the tractor started moving. But more importantly was the effect of the plow on the soil. Turning back every few moments to see, he took the tractor all the way down to the end of the field, turned, and headed all the way back. With a flick of his wrist he turned the tractor off, dismounted, and had a closer look at just what the plow had wrought.

"That's some mighty fine equipment you've got there good sir? I don't have much, but if it be pleasin' you, I'm certain we can wrangle together some sort of agreement for this here machine," he said, placing a hand against the engine housing, then snatching it back. "Hot!"

There was laughter, and soon he was laughing with them. But the show continued on- at least as sure as Islington assured everyone that *the government would be footing the bill*. Most residents, while knowing that the people who worked for the government were a good sort, had long since held little faith of their ability to truly do good for the community- in the normal course of things they never saw the pirate raids that their government was fending off, or the economic shortfalls that the government dealt with, and so it seemed that they must be doing nothing but sitting on their kiesters and lording over the population. But *this*? This was something new.

The first hurdle overcome, Daniel knew that while many more lay in wait, that they were really, certainly, positively on their way to success. And he also knew to the same degree that these people needed it. That this endeavour- not just the militarily mandated mission- was worth it. He could see it in their eyes, in their postures, and in how they walked. These people needed it. Daniel would make certain they got it- the whole deal, the whole package. It would take a while for the jumpships to free up, but when they did, they would come here. To this world, and then to the next, bringing with them all that was promised and more.

It was one thing to plot for and against a people who had only existed in fiction before, who one saw not as real thinking entities, but words on a page- a collection of data. It was certainly another to be here amongst them. And while none of them would jeopardize the mission, or 'go native', they all knew that this work would be vital to their future. And it was.

ISF agent Roderic Miraio took another look through his macrobinoculars. The technology being displayed was primitive, simple. But it occurred to him that it was effective nevertheless- and perhaps even more so due to its apparently primacy. He took out his radio, and keyed to a coded band, then spoke one and one sentence only.

"Get me a copy of the flightpath of this 'Avante Garde'."

April 12th 2006
Lubyanka Square, Moscow
Russian Federation, Earth.

The room was buried deep in what had once been the KGB headquarters. The walls of the room were lined with lead and crushed copper ore, and the air was filled with the almost inaudible whine of white noise generators. It was as secure a room as modern technology could make, which made it an ideal place for meetings which never officially happened.

The eight people who had just entered the room were not any different from what you would expect to find at a board meeting of any midsize company. They didn't stand out in anyway, except for the fact that not a single one of them was distinctive in any way. There was nothing to give away the fact that every person in the room was an experienced member of their countries intelligence services.

"Welcome Gentlemen." Said the man taking his place at the head of the table. "Let me introduce myself for those of you who haven't met me before. I am Colonel Alexei Kuznetsov, formerly of the Federal Security Service and now assigned to GDI's Intelligence Directorate."

The American representative, Charles Green, leaned forward, "Alexei, let me be the first to thank you were inviting us to come here." He smirked. "Though if we had known getting inside simply a matter of boldly walking through the front door, we would've had someone in here years ago."

"Anyway," Green continued. "I was wondering if you could enlighten me on how Russia ended up in charge of this operation?"

"President Ryan backed Russia on this because we have a great deal of experience in dealing with large heavily armed criminal gangs. And unofficially because the FSB has the greatest amount of freedom in dealing security threats." Alexei replied.

"Now as to why you are here." Alexei said.

"As you all know, the GDI expeditionary force will be leaving in several months. Current analysis of Port Krin, which you all have access to, indicates that we should be able to seize the city without too many casualties. However, as you all know, it is not seizing the city to be the difficult part, but holding on to it."

"Interrogations of the captured pirates revealed that there does not seem to be any centralized internal security or foreign intelligence agencies on the planet. Instead the planet seems to be run by something not too dissimilar to the Mafia. The major difference is that each city is ruled either a single Boss or by an alliance of the most powerful groups, with the leader of the strongest group as a leader of the city."

"However, even in the cities that are ruled by a single leader, there are numerous groups that operate under his umbrella but are not powerful not to challenge his authority."

He paused to see if there were any comments or questions before continuing.

"These facts pose a challenge to our political masters, who would much rather stomp out 'crime' in any city GDI captures. Unfortunately for our leaders, crimes such as drug use, prostitution & various other things are not only permitted, but are considered completely acceptable in Port Krin. Fortunately for us, they are intelligent enough to know that attempting to use soldiers to deal with these types of 'crimes' will likely result in failure, and attempting to ban such behavior could provoke a revolt among the people there."

"An additional difficulty is that all available transport capability will be devoted to the military. Therefore regulating these 'industries' will prove impossible for us, because we will be unable transport sufficient quantities of law enforcement officers to Port Krin."

Alexei gave wry look to the rest of the people sitting around the table.

"So officially our job will be to identify the different criminal groups

in Port Krin and the other cities on Antallos, and prevent them from compromising any of the soldiers who will be stationed there."

"Unofficially, our true job is to prevent any of the groups in the cities we capture from existing independently. We are going to take over the different groups in a city and combine them into a single organized association which would be under the control of GDI Intelligence Directorate. Our two primary goals will be to prevent any leaks, and to ensure that nothing takes place within the city without our knowing about."

"The will be accomplished by ensuring that every bar, brothel or other entertainment venue which our soldiers will patronize will be under our control and surveillance. And especially ensure that any of the card sharks, loan sharks, prostitutes or other entertainers, will not be working for any other organizations thereby ensuring that our soldiers are not compromised."

One of the guests spoke up.

"The established interests are not going to just roll over and let us assume control. And we also won't be able to secure control of the entire city quickly as we need to. Therefore what strategy are we going to use to take over the city?"

Alexei answered.

"Basically we will be operating something like a protection racket, except we are not going to be extorting money. We will be working toward gaining influence and control over the underworld of Port Krin, therefore payment will come in information, tips & non-cooperation with other groups."

"We will also be providing the muscle to back up those people who are turning to us for protection, by preventing any interference by other groups, mediating between any conflicts with the military & assassinating the leaders of any groups that pose a threat or are too important to allow total freedom of action."

"Strategically we are going to first takeover the area closest to where

the occupation force is going to be based. Our Primary goal is to prevent our soldiers from being compromised. So we are going to create a safe zone around the base for the soldiers. Once we have fully secured that area, we can move on with our efforts to expand control of the city."

He paused, and studied the reactions of the people around the table. As they contemplated what their actual mission would be.

"However all that is in the future. Right now the important thing is for your agencies to begin putting together lists of agents who would be suitable for this kind of operation. Because this mission will be so far away, we'll need trusted people who can act of their own initiative in regards to the changing circumstances they are sure to find there, and are not afraid of getting their hands dirty in an operation."

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]**The Periphery, Planet Antallos**[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]**Port Krin**[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]**July 16, 3021**[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Gusts of wind from the nearby waterfront blew swaths of dust across the ferrocrete landing pad of Port Krin's space port facility while a group of men descended from the ramp of a recently landed DropShip. They wore rag-tag paramilitary clothes in half a dozen different sets of camouflage and wide-cut robes custom made for the desert climate of Antallos, and each of them carried a large backpack and two worn suitcases. To the experienced eyes of the older men that had found their employ at what was supposed to be the city state's custom agency but in fact only served as an easy means to collect bribes the newcomers looked like men who knew how to use a gun or a knife. Mercenaries, most likely, the customs agent thought, guns for hire. Nothing out of the ordinary for Port Krin. Their leader payed the 'fees', and two minutes later the man at the space port's counter had already forgotten the newcomers even existed. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Burn me sideways! Finally, we're there!" Sergeant Percival 'Perci' Braiden exclaimed with a sigh of relief. It felt good to have solid ground under one's feet again and smell [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]*real*[/FONT][FONT = Verdana, sans-serif] air, not the canned oxygen they breathed in space.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Alright, everybody, check your gear and keep your wallets close and your guns closer," Captain James McCann, formerly of Her Majesty's [/FONT][FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]*Special Air Service*[/FONT][FONT = Verdana, sans-serif], ordered the group of ten. "You all read the briefings and saw the footage. That's a dangerous place, and the last thing I want is to blow our cover by getting into some unnecessary fight," he emphasized the last bit to his bystanders. The special forces vanguard the GDI had sent ahead stood closely around the mission's commanding officer, making it impossible for any other passers-by to listen in - if there had been any. "Sergeant, get us a ground car."[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Sergeant Yoram Wolf, ex-Mossad, nodded briefly and trodded off to the parking lot. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Another gust of wind cleared some of the sand that kept being blown into the air from their view and someone whistled through his teeth at the scene that came into view. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Morgenstern shook his head. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Damn, it really does look like-." [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]McCann cut him off. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Will you just stop with that, Sam?

You've been bringing that up ever since you saw the first photos. It's getting old by now!" he sounded more annoyed than angry at Lieutenant Samuel Morgenstern. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Come on, the resemblance is so strong it pokes you in the eye!" the sinewy Israeli protested to no avail while carefully hauling his two suitcases from one place to another. Half of them were full of either delicate or outright dangerous equipment that they would all have need of during the coming days. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"I don't care as long as he doesn't try any Obiwan Kenobi antics on the locals," Titus 'Titan' O'Reilly muttered. The soft spoken black man with the build of a seven foot tall professional wrestler was one of the team's two computer specialists and had a vital role to play in the Antallos operation. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Alright, spit it out so we can get over it already and do what we've come here for," McCann snapped. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Morgenstern stopped with a wide grin, took a deep breath and stretched his arms out as if to encompass the whole city. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Welcome, my friends, to [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]*Mos Eisley* [/FONT] [FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]. " [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]The reception among the other team members was... muted. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"It only works together with the 'wretched hive of scum and villainy' part, Sam," McCann responded dryly while a largish groundcar fleckered with rust slowly rolled towards them, following a stoic Sergeant Wolf.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Doesn't look that much like Star Wars to me anyway," Lt. Aaron David shrugged, then added something in Hebrew only the other Mossad member understood before moving further down the road with his luggage, eradicating the smile from Morgenstern's face.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"What did he say, Sam?" Braiden casually asked with a frown.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"That it looked less like Mos Eisley and more like Gaza," the lieutenant and former member of Israel's Mossad replied quietly.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Well, there is at least one thing that they have in common: you'll hardly find greater hives of scum and villainy in the known galaxy," the Yorkshire native added sourly when Morgenstern had moved on.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]xxxxx[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]When Wolf and McCann re-entered the waiting ground car again after half an hour - the driver had grumpily settled into his fate, especially when two of the men had tacitly unveiled their sidearms - they smelled of alcohol.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"If you had told us there was a party we would have come with you, helping you carry your burden, you know," Kiyoshi Youta remarked dryly. The inconspicuous Japanese national was the team's sniper, one of the five best marksmen of the JSDF.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"The bank's chairman personally wanted to express his gratitude about our generous deposit so Wolf and me got a dose of his personal brandy," McCann explained matter-of-

factly. "Not quite like a good scottish single malt, but passable," the team leader shrugged innocently. [/FONT]

[FONT= Verdana, sans-serif]"And refusing the invitation would have been impolite," Wolf added evenly. [/FONT]

[FONT= Verdana, sans-serif]Sergeant Braiden leaned over to Youta, whispering. [/FONT]

[FONT= Verdana, sans-serif]"I'm just happy we're off the damn DropShip and have some ground under our feet. I swear, one more day together with those guys ending each lame joke with 'Jeeeweew, in spaaaaace!' and I'd have strangled them all by myself." [/FONT]

[FONT= Verdana, sans-serif]Their ride dropped them off at a street corner less than five hundred yards away from Vorax's palace and the garrison's barracks. The piece of real estate had been the closest they could find in the short time they had had to set up their operation. [/FONT]

[FONT= Verdana, sans-serif]To any ordinary passer-by in the narrow streets of Port Krin the group of gossiping men would have looked completely inconspicuous. Farm hands come to the city the spend their month's wage in the whore houses or gambling dens, or small time offworld traders trying to make a fortune here, or maybe some low-level criminals trying to find a way into the good-will of one of the mob families that actually ran the city. Port Krin had a tendency to attract those kinds of people, chew them up and leave them to rot in the backstreets. The Mob didn't like newcomers. Newcomers were a danger to stability, to tacitly agreed zones of influence and to shared fields of business. The Mob liked stability. All of that went through the heads of some of those who did not outright ignore the obvious newcomers. [/FONT]

[FONT= Verdana, sans-serif]What nobody realized was that beneath the banter and jests those men's eyes very closely watched their surroundings, and at least one of their hands never swayed too far from where more experienced onlookers would have expected to find sidearms under robes and coats. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]**The Periphery, Planet Antallos**[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]**Port Krin**[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]**July 17, 3021**[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Integral part of 'Operation Vanguard' was actually getting to know the city in and out. Given the severely restricted time frame they were working in, 'knowing' the city meant mapping it thoroughly, digitizing said map and sending it to inbound GDI force the moment it left hyperspace. To that end the small house the special operations' team had bought from the gold it had deposited had been changed into a high-tech operations' centre and shielded against too curious ears with enough white noise to shut down a commercial radio station if the need ever arose.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Three teams were out in the city, using hand-held laser rangefinders and positioning systems to map roads and important buildings onto a preprogrammed grid. The devices they used hardly looked different from handheld computers and commercial video cameras, but the men still tried to use them as inconspicuously as possible, not truly knowing if similar-looking devices existed in the Inner Sphere. The actual map would then be built from the positions they localized and transmitted wirelessly to their hide-out.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Yoram Wolf and Aaron David were one such team, the two Sephardic Jews hardly optically sticking out between the locals but for their height. The air in the narrow streets away from the slave markets and major gambling dens was sticky and sour, filled with smoke from hundreds of chimneys, sweat and the smell of garbage and faeces here. It stank, but it was easier to stand than what they had seen at the slave markets. Humans herded like cattle, sold like priced sows - it was the face of barbarism, of every sort of moral decay. Compared to that, the backalleys were almost normal. In fact, it reminded both men of the times they had 'worked' in Gaza, which was just as much, if not even more crowded than Port Krin's less well-off districts were.[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Turning around a corner into the next street of Port Krin's maze of back alleys the found themselves facing a

seven foot tall giant of a man and a band of rabble-rousers right behind him. It was obvious it was one of the city's countless street gangs, and the leader, while tall as a mountain, was hardly twenty five years old. [/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Oi, fellas, nice gear ya got'ere! What'cha think? Ya hand it over and what money ya got and me and me buddies 'ere will let ya pass [/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]and[/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif] keep ya protected." He slapped a large club into the palm of his left hand to emphasize his point. [/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]Instead of answering, David just sighed. In a motion almost too fast for the eye to follow his hand shot forward, formed a fist and slammed into the ganger's solar plexus, instantly driving all breath from the man's lungs. Before he could even react the Israeli had landed three more strikes on neuralgic points, sending the man unconsciously to the ground. Wolf casually rested his hand on the butt of his .45 cal HK USP for the others to see, but those street gangers actually were intelligent enough to know when to fight and when not. Pulling their no longer so imposing boss by the legs, they left the spot and let the two commandos continue.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]xxxxxx[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]The man going by the name of Aren Questos watched it all from behind his shop's window in the relaxing coolness of an air conditioned room. The fight had been most telling. Who ever those two had been, they were no ordinary mercenaries. 'Elite jump infantry, maybe,' he mused. 'Or some other elite military - or ex-military,' that thought was a lot more uncomfortable, 'unit in action.' Strangers mapping the city. Oh, Questos had no idea of the equipment they had used for it seemed awefully small for such a task, but his keen eyes had seen [/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]what[/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif] they were doing. [/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]How[/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif] they were doing it was, at least for now, secondary. He had to report his superiors that someone was apparently planning to take over Port Krin, and who ever did that knew what their trade.

Who would have thought he could actually report something helpful back to LOKI for a change?! Still, he sighed. Soon, the quiet and peaceful times of his cover as a baker would be over. Which, coming to think of it, was a damn shame: He was a very [FONT] [FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]good[/FONT] [FONT=Verdana, sans-serif] baker...[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]**The Periphery, Planet Antallos**[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]**The Proctor Dominions, Proctor**[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]**July 20, 3021**[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Vorax' position is starting to become untenable after that 'Motherload' ruse he staged," Nika Hernandez stated, her right index finger tapping nervously on the edge of the large map placed on the table in front of her. "People feel betrayed, and unsafe, with all those mercenaries and militiamen gone. No doubt also thanks to our common efforts," she added more consciously for the other three persons in the room. Well, there were more people in the conference room than the four of them, but the personal bodyguards and servants that carried food and refreshments in and out did not really count.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"I've spent considerable monetary means to get under his skin," Walter Kapadopolous muttered sourly. The patriarch of the family that ruled the mostly desert city state of Proctor was a man past fifty and easily weighed threehundred pounds, most of it fat. But he was a shrewd tactician. Heading Proctor uncontested for now one and a half decades was proof enough of that. "For your sake I hope the scheme of your's works out."[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Threats, and that so early in the day?" Nika asked lightly with a superficial smile. "Why, I feel honoured, Walter." Hernandez was his polar opposite, barely six foot four tall and with features that made her seem almost wrought-iron. That the right side of her head had been shaved clean and now featured a tattoo just added to her sinewy, dangerous appearance.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Don't flatter yourself," the overweight ruler stopped her with a wave of his hand. "As you said yourself, so far it has worked."[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"What we are concerned with is: [/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]how[/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif] long will it work?" Tall, gaunt and clad in a custom-made suit, Pietro Shemer represented Resortland, close to the temperate northern polar regions. "It's not like we don't see the merit in the approach you proposed and we agreed on, but so far all we get is rumours on the street, and as far as I know of, none of the militia commanders has yet reacted to our offered bribes."[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Point is," Matthias Gemini of the mining enclave of Kronkite chimed in, "that we are running the risk of missing the point where we should make our move. Deploying troops for that alone demands time and coordination, and for obvious reasons we cannot keep our own troops away from our cities too long."[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Well, [/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]I[/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif] am certainly not the one stalling here," Hernandez huffed. "I just don't see any reason to run into this head over heels if there is a chance to get it all on a silver platter without the need of any of us having to get their hands dirty," she explained. "That, and any rash action leaves us open to attacks from other... industrious statesmen." [/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Not that I'd shed a single tear if any of you lost a lance worth of battlemechs or two," she added in her thoughts. For her this whole endeavour was as much a way to diminish her immediate neighbours' strengths as it was a way to get her hands on the planet's honey-pot that Port Krin constituted. Hermantown was the southernmost state of their secret, impromptu coalition, and its own southern flank was damnably vulnerable. No doubt Malice Fist, Digger's Stop and Port James were all looking for an opportunity to capitalize on the situation - either the one concerning Port Krin, or the one concerning Hermantown's arable southernmost steppe. [/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Industrious statesmen," Kapadopolous guffawed, his considerable body mass shaking like one large jelly, "I like that, I really do." He pulled a handkerchief from one of his silk robe's many pockets and swiped the sweat off his forehead before calming down again. "I'm not saying we should rush into action either," he held one hand up to stave off any protest, "but for the sake of cooperation, let's put Vorax' and our forces on the table," he proposed. [/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]There were signs of agreement from the gathered representatives, and Nika Hernandez also nodded and presented her best fake smile. Sometimes she hated working in what basically was a pit full of lying snakes, but deep down she knew she was no better. They all would backstab each other on the first possible occasion. The trick was being the one who stood last in line, with the back against the wall.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"According to my sources Vorax has a company of 'mechs in his employ, and the militia has another mechanized company and up to a single regiment of infantry. Probably even an aerofighter lance, but I'm not too certain on that," Gemini shrugged, rattling down the numbers with the cool voice of an accountant.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"He has been busy frantically trying to hire more mercenaries lately," Shemer added. "Do your 'sources' have anything on those?"[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]Matthias Gemini shook his head. The Resortland emissary looked as if an angry retort was just waiting to break out of his mouth, but he kept his lips tightly shut. It was obvious he hated committing his city's forces to a fight where the enemy's strength were more of a guesstimate than anything else, and Hernandez could not even fault him for that.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Well, how do our own forces shape up?" the ruler of Proctor drew the focus back to himself, then addressed Hernandez. "Given that it was you who brought our little alliance into existence it's nothing but prudent for you to start here, [/FONT]
[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]*Generalissima*[/FONT][FONT=Verdana, sans-serif] Hernandez." [/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]The rulers of Hermantown had held that title for generations, with the correct gender inflection, of course, but out of Walter Kapadopolous' mouth it sounded like a joke. 'I ought to be angry,' she thought, but what good would that do her? Proctor had twice the population of Hermantown, and throwing a hissy fit here would get her nowhere. So she put up a brave front and smiled politely.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Thank you, Archon Kapadopolous. Hermantown will contribute a reinforced 'mech lance to the Port Krin operation, as well as an infantry batallion." And if any of you deceiving sons of bitches tries to backstab me, a lance of heavy 'mechs and an anti-mech militia infantry regiment will fuck your plans to kingdom come! Hermantown had not survived on its own for this long by being idle; her home was ready to defend itself. The others took notes on all she said, the irony almost making her genuinely smile. It was obvious none of them would be honest here and now, but that had to be expected.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]Kapadopolous motioned Gemini that the representative of Konkrite was the next to speak.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"A batallions of tanks, an understrength infantry batallion and one artillery lance is all we have and can add to the fight," was all he said. The lie here was so blatant that everybody just ignored it outright. Konkrite was mining iron and zinc and was earning one hell of a buck with that. But pointing that out would only have served to create tensions around the table, and that would have been contra-productive.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Three lances of aerospace fighters and a flight of VTOL transports carrying infantry is all I can pledge," Pietro Shemer stated reluctantly.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Now that is a rather... meek contribution," Hernandez said despite herself, but a look into the other two men's eyes showed her that they shared the sentiment.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]"Resortland is twice as far away from

Port Krin as any of your cities are," Shemer tried to justify himself, "and we don't have the means to send larger contingents of troops that far away. Now if you could lease us that DropShip of yours...?" he focussed on the archon of Proctor whose head turned red almost faster than Hernandez could notice. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"God damn it, Pietro, we've been over this fuck knows how many times?!" he yelled, spittle flying from the corner of his mouth. "For the last fuckin' time: no. DropShip. for. you. Do you get that?!" [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]'So Proctor and Resortland had already been in negotiations earlier? Interesting,' Nika Hernandez listened very thoroughly. [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Hey, hey, no need to be rude here," Shemer shrugged the tirade off. "After all, asking can't hurt, eh?" [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]"Getting on the bad side of my temper [/FONT] [FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]can[/FONT] [FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]," the obese ruler of Proctor countered with a guttural growl. "And as I see it, it's again going to be me who'll pay the bill for this operation because you wimps don't have the firepower to pull it off," he huffed. "Alright, this is what Proctor pledges to the Port Krin operation: one reinforced 'mech company, one mechanized company and a full regiment of infantry!" [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]That was quite an impressive contribution, Nika had to admit. Now all that was left to hammer out was the date of their attack to change the political map of Antallos forever... [/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]**The Periphery, Planet Antallos**[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]**Port Krin**[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]**July 29, 3021**[/FONT]

[FONT = Verdana, sans-serif]Sergeant Percival 'Perci' Braiden

carefully squeezed the mass of composite explosives into the crack in Port Krin's city walls and stuck the miniscule radio detonator onto it, hidden from plain sight. A native of Edinburgh, the thirty-eight year old former S.A.S. member had never thought he'd visit a place which actually still *used* city walls, though in all honesty, Port Krin reminded him less of his home town than of what he had read about 19th century Sudan. The similarities were awkward. Though he certainly was no General Kitchener, one could with some degree of truth say that they were here to civilize the savages, abolish slavery and all that. The comparison brought a wry smile to the red-headed man's face as he finished his work on this part of the wall.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]They had received word from the lead JumpShip the day before. By now it was only a matter of a day or two until the invasion force would make landfall and all hell would break loose. A much needed cleansing thunderstorm, that was. Operation Vanguard's task, besides providing intel on the city itself, thus had changed to their secondary objectives - sabotage. [/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]Unlike the comparison to medieval Edinburgh, where guilds and streets of the same professions had been tasked with maintaining and manning portions of the city walls, Port Krin had no such pre-industrial agreement going for it. The massive plates of ferro-concrete were weathered, most of them far older than the reign of the recent urban despot, with cracks and splinters all across them. Locating spots to place moldable explosives into had been easy, actually placing them there had not been much harder so far. Street lighting in Port Krin was a pin-point affair restricted to those quarters of the city that could pay the lavish extra fees into Vorax' pockets, and most backalleys lay empty during the middle of the night, deserted of life except for the usual pockets of shady dealings.[/FONT]

[FONT=Verdana, sans-serif]Remaining unseen had been easy under these circumstances. They had planted explosives at select positions along the city walls, on radio towers, near militia barracks. Now all that remained to do was to wait for the signal.[/FONT]

United States of America
Earth, Sol System
Grantville Cluster
December 27, 2005

Chloe Sullivan smoothed her jeans over. It was a nervous action. She was a rookie, only hired by the Post a scant two months before the first 'pirate invasion'. She had no idea what to say or do when confronted with the First Lady of the United States. She didn't even have the comfort of the professional looking business casual suit-and-skirt she typically wore, which at least projected a confident image. She had instead dressed for rough and tumble fieldwork, since the primary subject for the project was a hands-on mechanic types and they planned to meet her on her turf. So Chloe had opted for jeans and a navy-blue windbreaker over a plain white cotton T-shirt, nothing out of the ordinary on the garage floor. Practical, and appropriate for the job, but it made her feel horribly underdressed. It had been bad enough when she did the meet and greet with the august Ph.D.'s that Bob Holtzman had tapped for the Antallos Project the day before, and felt like a child at the adults table. The prospect of meeting the first lady in jeans was giving her an anxiety attack.

She hadn't foreseen the prestige factor in all this. Chloe had virtually fought a one-woman war against the corporation that had all but turned her hometown into a company town, down to ownership of the local banks and grocery stores, and ran the local farms halfway into the ground with poor safety and environmental standards that poisoned crops and livestock. She'd stood up in court and accused powerful men. But she still found herself as giddy as a schoolgirl at the prospect of meeting Catherine Ryan, the 2004 Time magazine woman of the year, touted as an example to the working women of America, as the only first lady to have a career, and a distinguished one at that, beyond her husband's political ambitions. Her cousin Lucy had called it a step in the right direction, and predicted that a female president wouldn't be long behind now.

The thought brought a numbed sense of sorrow. Lucy would have loved all of this; meeting the first lady and creating the media that

would bring the socioeconomic and political realities of the new world into the public attention. But Lucy was dead, killed in the renewed rounds of fighting that had broken out in the Democratic Republic of Congo after the second pirate invasion had resulted in the temporary collapse of the government and almost another civil war. Chloe's ever-impulsive cousin had volunteered for a two-year stint as an aid worker, administering vaccinations in a part of the country considered 'relatively safe'.

Thinking of aid work brought Chloe's mind back to the inner sphere, where, if what she had read was correct, billions lived under the whims of oligarchs not dissimilar to the regimes that Lucy had so deplored in Africa. The best thing she could do for her cousin would be to give the people of Earth reason to empathize with that suffering, and help open the way to bringing the ideals Lucy held so dear to an audience wider than any would have dared imagined just scant years ago. She had pled a struggling town's case to a nation. Now she would plead Antallos's and by extension, the Inner Sphere's, to the world, and possibly set millions more on the path of service and mercy that Lucy had given her life to. Suddenly, meeting the first lady didn't seem such a big thing, against the enormity of what the notes she held in her hands represented. "I can't give you a burial," she whispered to the childhood playmate she had lost. "But I can give you a crusade."

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There was a time in Joe Chalmer's life when he had thought of a wrench primarily as something you used to tighten up nuts and bolts. That time seemed like a distant eon ago; it had only taken a week of a Laisa happily reunited with her favorite toy to disabuse him of any such notion. He was quickly beginning to understand why the Antallan girl treated the wrench as such a valued heirloom. In addition to functioning in the standard role of such a tool, it's construction was not steel but some alloy that conducted almost as well as silver, and the adjustable span could be made to fit between the wiring of most standardized components in Inner sphere machinery. Instead of going for a spool of wire like a sane woman,

the lass from Port Krin was apt to just jam the wrench in to temporarily connect a circuit without so much as turning the power off first, trusting in insulated rubber gloves to protect her from electrocution. Nor was she shy about using the instrument as a makeshift prybar or hammer; the thoughtful long dead designer had balanced it to allow such use. And like more a few mechanics Joe knew, Laisa was an adherent of the "try hitting it first, maybe that'll shake something loose" school.

Currently, the tail end of wrench was being used to "sweep" out gunk from a salvaged air scrubber, while the tool's owner cursed the former owner of the air scrubber, whatever dumbkopf who was in theoretically in charge of maintaining it (theoretically, since he had clearly never made a practice of maintenance) when it was in the hands of aforementioned owner, and their mothers, who were, if he was following her profanity correctly, possessed of more venereal diseases than he knew existed. Which, after having been assigned to keep an eye on the girl for over a month, he knew to mean that she was in a good mood. If she were truly aggrieved, she would be insulting the equipment itself. That was good. Joe had just received orders to drag her away from her tinkering, and he didn't want the invective directed at him.

"Laisa" He said softly, staying at a respectful distance. He'd learned the hard way that it was always a good idea to keep his distance from the jury-rig-happy mechanic, as she hadn't developed the habit of making her work space safe for observers or visitors. She was used to others knowing well enough to keep clear of anything undergoing maintenance. Joe had narrowly avoided getting a fairly high concentration of acid dumped on him, and an intel-weenie from some agency he'd never heard of did get a fairly painful dose of electroshock therapy when he failed to warn her of his approach. Though he wasn't so sure that last one was an accident. The guy was an oily bastard, and rude on top of that, and almost everyone he'd interviewed had expressed a desire to cause him bodily harm.

Laisa turned, noticing him. 'Oh, Joe. Sorry, I didn't see you. Hold on a moment." She extracted her wrench, and laid the equipment aside, then went for a rag to clean up. "What brings you here so early in the morning? Thought you liked your beauty sleep."

Joe bit back a retort. Laisa needled him mercilessly, and explaining that he was up almost as early as she was would only give her more ammunition. "Someone at a much higher pay grade than my own humble self decided that you're apparently interesting enough to merit an interview. Some people are coming to talk to you in a few hours, so I figured I'd give you a heads up."

The young woman made a face. "Another one? I thought I must have told my entire life's story the last time. I had better at least get a tub of ice cream for this one."

Joe shook his head at her exaggeration. She really was cute when she pretended to be upset so she could make outrageous claims and demands. "No, not a debrief; an interview, as in news interview. Congrats, girl, you're going to be on TV. Now remember me when you're all rich and famous, kay?"

"On TV? On the screen in front of millions of viewers?" Laisa started to tie back her hair.

"That's the word. People here are curious about what life is like on other worlds. And you'll get to tell them."

"But I don't have anything to wear! And my hair is a mess," she fretted. Then she looked down at herself. An oil-stained blue collared shirt and denim jeans already worn to fading around the knees. "Oh, Jesu I'm a mess."

She might be from another planet, but she was still a woman. Joe suppressed his urge to laugh, knowing she wouldn't appreciate it. "Don't worry, there'll be an expert camera crew. Hell, probably a make-up crew. It'll be fine."

"But I don't know what to say. I'm not good at talking to people." She was wringer her hands in worry now. "Now machines are fine, I can talk to machines. . ."

Joe sighed and mentally resigned himself to spending the next hour reassuring the near frantic girl.

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It was almost amusing the alacrity with which the gate guards waved them through once the secret service agent handed over his charge's credentials. Which, to Arnold Dane, PhD, almost made the preceding few minutes of arguing with them over whether he was to be admitted worthwhile. The Professor of Cultural Anthropology had been delighted when he was asked to contribute to the Antallos Project. He'd also been delighted when he won the straw-drawing they ended up having to determine which of the various experts would accompany the enterprising young Miss Sullivan and her camera crew, quietly cribbed from Fox News, to the initial meeting. But the confusion of being held up at the gate didn't exactly do wonders for his disposition. Still, his mood was improving. He'd heard that Bob Holtzman had pitched the project directly to the president, but hadn't quite realized the first lady had taken a personal interest. Her being here was really doing wonders for the cooperation of the military. Cathy Ryan had delegated one of the flabbergasted privates at the gate to park his car, and asked him to join herself and Chloe for the ride down to the internment center. He figured it would be red carpet treatment from here on.

"So, Dr. Dane, what's your initial impression of the sociocultural state of the Inner Sphere," the first lady asked directly, getting straight down to business.

"It's difficult to say, erm," he paused, unsure of how to properly address the first lady.

Cathy smiled thinly at that. "Dr. Ryan. I do have a MD after all, though the press never does seem to remember that."

"It's because the political writers think of you as First Lady first, and doctor second," Chloe explained. "Time got it right in their Woman of the Year issue though, so hopefully we'll fix that soon enough."

"Thank you," Cathy said, nodding to the journalist. "You were saying Dr. Dane?"

"Well the issue is somewhat complex. While there is some common culture across the inner sphere, due to the integration of the various powers into a unified 'Star League' at some point in the past, each of the major houses, and indeed, each planet developed their own values, customs, and mores. Furthermore, there's the issue of recognizing the difference between the official line and the reality on the ground. The Federate Suns, for example, are theoretically set up as a feudalistic structure, but in practice, they seem to have many elements much more in line with what we think of as a centralized national government. At best, I'm only hoping to get a picture of life on Antallos. The political and socioeconomic forces of the inner sphere are something we won't be able to understand in a holistic manner without much more data than we have. Though that is part of the reason for this exercise, isn't it? Convincing the American, no, the Earther on the street that we need to engage with the Inner Sphere."

The two women exchanged a glance. "He'll do," Ryan pronounced.

Supreme Court Strikes Down Weapons Ban

May 17th, 2006

Washington - Americans have an individual right to possess and use military grade weapons, even when said weapons are not related to service in a government militia.

In a historic ruling, the US Supreme Court on Thursday declared 5 to 4 that the Second Amendment's guarantee of a right to "keep and bear arms" means that the government cannot enact a ban on anti-armor or other military grade weapons or otherwise prevent citizens from keeping said weapons at home for personal protection or other lawful uses.

The landmark constitutional pronouncement came as the nation's highest court struck down bans on private possession of heavy weapons and mechanized combat systems. The case is *Becerra v. United States*.

The majority justices said "The Founding Fathers intended for the Second Amendment to ensure that the Citizens would be allowed to own weapons that would let them defend against an invading army. Advances in modern technology have rendered commonly held private weapons insufficient to stop or resist an invading army. This indicates that the spirit and purpose of the Second Amendment is being violated by the ban on the sale of weapon systems to private citizens.

The majority justices further stated that the Federal Government's ban on the sale of weapon systems violated "the right of law-abiding responsible citizens to use arms in defense of hearth and home."

The Supreme Justice sought to address concerns by many critics – and the dissenting justices – that such a ruling might lead to an arms race among American homeowners stocking up with machine guns, grenades, and rocket launchers.

In a Press Conference Mr. Becerra praised the Supreme Court for their willingness to uphold the rights of American Citizens. He was later

overheard to remark that "This ruling took a weight off of my mind, because it was only a matter of time before our politicians started getting ideas from their counterparts in the Inner Sphere."

A close friend of Mr. Becerra's, categorically denied that there was any truth to rumors that Mr. Becerra had been inquiring to the pricing and availability of Uranium and Plutonium. However he did point out that although Nuclear Bombs, are Weapons of Mass Destruction, they are definitely military grade weapons, and thus would be covered by the phrase "other military grade weapons" in the Court's ruling.

**Fort Irwin
California
Earth
10 June 2006**

Glaring light and a constant, rumbling roar bathed the military base. The assembled crowd of politicians, military personnel, civilians, and reporters raised their hands as one to shield their eyes from the awful glare of exhaust of the many Dropships racing for space, carrying their soldiers and loved ones to the waiting fleet of Jumpships and from there, to a distant world. The journey was expected to be long, far longer than anyone native to Earth had ever experienced except in historical narrative. And despite the assurance given by scientists and generals, no one could be certain that those brave men and women would ever be seen again.

"Godspeed, people," murmured Jane Koltan for the comfort of her husband's embrace. Under other circumstances, she might have gone with them. But the GDI had decided to retain a small handful of Dropships, her *Drakon* among them, for use by Earth and Jane would continue to train people in space operations. Even so, the loss of so much lift capacity was likely to hurt for sometime.

The Port Krin operation had been debated endlessly even as the GDI geared up for it. Some had opposed it; some even had good reason. But Chloe Sullivan's documentary on Port Krin had firmly solidified public support in favor of liberating what was now being called the "most wretched hive of scum and villainy in the Inner Sphere". Port Krin had survived thus far by being mostly ignored by the Powers That Be; that was about to change now.

But still, it was such a gamble...

**Jumpship *Lady Liberty*
Zenith Jump Point
Waypoint 5
Antallos/Earth Road
Periphery
4 July 2006/3021**

The Jumpship formerly known as the *Kyp Brahnigan* hung in space with her sister ships at the Zenith jump point of a star they had visited many months ago. In their wisdom, the GDI planners back on Earth had decided that the Antallos Expedition should backtrack the same route used by the Pirate Army to go to Earth. The general idea was to sweep up and follow up expeditions that Aden Vorax might have sent to check up on his "investment".

So far, no traffic had been encountered so far, which suited the crews and passengers of the GDI fleet just fine. In the meantime, sensors both old and new studied everything around them.

"Check this out, General," Doctor Tran, a former astronomer turned astrogator, said as he pointed at the screen in front of him. On it was a splotchy mess of blue and green blobs interspersed with white points and a red and yellow ring.

"Very interesting, Doctor," General Davis replied. "What is it?"

"This is a view of the cosmic background radiation as we see it from our current position," Tran said, exasperated with the ignorance of laymen. His pointing finger traced the circle of light. "And this is the ISOT event."

"I thought the ISOT zone was spherical and happened all at once?" Davis said, puzzled.

"Well that is the current theory," Tran agreed. "But the ISOT area is also many lightyears across, which means all the light from the event won't all reach the same area of space at the same time. In fact, this ring we're seeing is actually expanding a small but noticeable amount. We saw it at our last few stops as well. Everything we see inside this ring happens to be our stars, everything outside are the stars we replaced."

"And how is this helpful?" Davis asked.

"It'll help us narrow down exactly how wide the ISOT area is, and if it is in fact really spherical," Tran answered. "I'm sure you military

types will find it useful somehow."

"I'm sure we can," Davis agreed. In fact, he could see several ways, but not anything relevant with his current mission. He tapped the screen. "How is it the pirates didn't notice this on the way in?"

"At a guess, I'd say they weren't looking," Tran replied with a shrug. "For a star-faring people, they're horribly uninterested in basic astronomy. You know, we ought to fix that."

"Get in line, Doctor," Davis said, shaking his head. "Get in line."

Fort Irwin NTC
Mech Hangar
May 10th 2006

"That was good work, Reed", the Major said. And he meant it. Lieutenant Reed had shaped up really well. By now, Staedele and him were forming up as a team pretty well. Combined with the small upgrades the techs had come up with, *Altes Eisen* was deadlier than ever. Instead of completely replacing the targetting systems and computers, the Cav had opted on a modular system that could be linked into the Inner Sphere standard systems, mostly for reasons of logistical nature and familiarity with the old systems. The similarly modular datalinks were also a godsend when it came to keeping the bigger picture in mind. Another small upgrade consisted of a box containing a laser designator, to be controlled by the pilot or co-pilot, mounted on top of the Mechs shoulder. While virtually unarmored, the system was cheap and easily built in or removed. And, something that **really** made the Major happy, they had been able to contract a chinese company to copy the design of the Mech-launched short-range drones and for the first time since, well, forever, the Cav had a true reserve of the little buggers. He just hoped the original producers never found out.

"Thanks, Major," the Lieutenant replied. "I wonder how LT Dansel will take it."

"Me too, Reed," the Major replied with a big grin. At the end of todays exercise between elements of Charlie and Bravo companies, he and Reed had had a short simulated duel with Dansel's Battlemaster, just for fun. Staedele had found his estimate of the Lieutenants skill to be right. The boy was a real natural talent. Staedele smiled savagely. 'But it's not like this old man doesn't have a few tricks up his sleeve. And Dansel is still green. Perhaps the greenest pilot in the entire company.' The duel had ended with *Altes Eisen* losing a lot of armor and one of the PPCs, but Staedele had outmaneuvered the bigger machine and, pulling one really mean little prank, managed to literally (in the simulation, of course) rip off the Mechs left leg at the knee.

"Seems like the company is slowly shaping up. Major Al Azim and Col. Jackson still have their work cut out for them, but at least the rifts between us Burons and the Firebrands are healing. The fallout from that pub brawl last week is slowly vanishing. And if we continue like this, the Battlemaster lance might actually, eventually, work together at least somewhat coordinated. Poor Dandel, he's been really thrown into the cold there."

Seeing someone else at the other end of the hangar, Staedele shouted: "Nice shot on that Hermes from Bravo, Tom. Nailed him at full speed." Lemell just gave a thumbs-up before vanishing towards the showers.

"So, Lieutenant, I still have a bit of paperwork afterwards, and then the entirety of our Mech pilots and co-pilots will frequent the local pub. You in?", Staedele asked. He wasn't lying. The paperwork did keep him busy. Especially as half his assets were idling most of the time. After a short conversation with the Brigade CO, that had been rectified. The *Distant Home* was now taking orders to ship satellites into orbit almost regularly and some of his infantrymen had been hired for short-duration jobs as advisors for various movie, TV or game productions. That provided a nice little side-income for the Cav and nobody had any real problem with it. He didn't get too many customers, of course, as he had to include a clause that authorised GDI and the US to call his people back to base at a moments notice. And there were, of course, some shadows following his people *everywhere*. Well, almost everywhere.

"Sure, Major, perhaps some... uh oh."

Looking in the direction Reed was looking, the Major saw one LT Dandel stomp into his direction, the mans face alternating between anger and hilarity. Before he could say anything, the Lieutenant had already commented on the little prank he had fallen to.

"Son of a bitch! I'm going to remember that, sir."

June 12th, 2006/3021
Nowhere, Draconis Combine
En-route to Epsilon Pegasii

The Combine's Periphery fringe was busy this time of year. Traders looking to skirt around the edges of civilized society were abundant, and the regular deep periphery expeditions were in full swing. So it was of little concern to Port Authority when a Scout class jumpship transitioned in at Zenith and requested an update of the current Star Almanac.

Nor was it of any worry when the Mule class dropship the little jumper carried undocked and began burning for orbit- while Nowhere was, for all intents and purposes, the back of nowhere, it still served as a competent staging area for exploration into the deep periphery, something which had often returned useful Star League materials, resources, or even new planets for colonization. And so it was that nobody noticed one dropship among many.

The Scout remained at Nowhere for two weeks- long enough to safely charge its drives, and for its passengers aboard the Mule to stock up on resources and materials- and, after some haggling, an official document liscensing them to retain any materials they recovered. Such liscences were expensive, but usually represented the legal bribes that kept the ISF from siezing your ship and your livelihood because you managed to find an version up heatsink drifting in space.

But to the crew of the expedition, curiously named 'Phantom Snowflake', these actions were all just a courtesy. Their starmaps had proved accurate, once they had reorientated them. They knew an exacting amount of detail about where they were going- now it was just a matter of getting there. And so, with a word to the Port Authority, the little jumpship vanished, transitioning into hyperspace.

When it failed to return, as so many did, it would merely be written off as another unfortunate loss, and then promptly forgotten.

And it did fail to return- weeks and even months passed, and the vessel was not seen again. But this was not due to is destruction or

loss, but rather to its success. Not that anything in the universe would be that easy.

As the Scout transitioned back into realspace, still many systems away from Epsilon Pegasii, it immediately noticed that it was not alone. Burning insys was another jumpship. Its bulbous form indicated it to be a *Magellan class*, something which was known to GDI to operate only in the hands of Comstar.

"That must be the Von Braun," remarked Captain Gerald Sanford, looking at the sensor images from high powered lenses scattered across the Scout's hull. His vessel had been significantly modified during the limited time that GDI had spent with it after its previous captain had found himself... short of breath and in deep trouble. He frowned, then made a decision. "Deploy the Stealth Sail. Hopefully we can finish charging before they spot us- and if not, well..."

The captain gestured to one of the 'new' panels that occupied the little ship's spacious bridge. While the Scout couldn't hope to match a *Magellan* in traditional ordinance, nuclear armament was a whole different story.

"Tell the kiddies we're on silent running- if we're lucky, they'll think us just another piece of debris. And if not, well, we'll see what happens then. Sanford out."

In the far distance the Von Braun trundled on, mapping the system and searching for Star League secrets. While light from the Scout would reach them momentarily, by the time they focused their scopes on the jump point, the modified 'stealth' solar sail would be deployed, and they would see nothing at all. Its radar absorbing properties ensured that, furthermore, they would see nothing but space. And so the Von Braun turned back to its duty, never knowing just how lucky it had been, and what fate it had avoided.

Unfortunately for its crew, they would soon know. Fate was not to be jilted so easily.

June 29th, 2006/3021

Alpheratz, Outworlds Allaince Capital

Laurentia Clavel awoke to a warzone. As she surveyed the streets from her perch atop an abandoned skyscraper, she caught sight of many refugees, militiamen, and civilians all running from the oppressive forms of the enemy battlemechs. Laurentia wasn't sure where they were from- since their initial appearance, they had communicated with no one. They made no demands, and apparently were operating on some sort of closed circuit. They were too disciplined to be pirates, and as far as she knew, there were no major rebellious elements in the OWA. So where did that leave them?

The air itself shook as a trio of PPC bolts ripped down the street. A aging Awesome, clad in the colours of the militia, was engaging several of the enemy mechs. Missile fire flew back and forth, while the azure bolts of charged particle energy tore through the sky. To the far west, an ASF squadron was performing hit and run maneuvers against a light lance that was attempting to breach the inner city cordon. And everywhere across the city were the dead and dying. Though she longed to help them, she knew that running to their aid would only result in more deaths. Better she protect those whom she had gathered into this old wreck of a building, protect them from the enemy that lay outside, then to get herself killed trying to link up with the dropship. She only hoped her commanding officer would understand, though she liked to think he was that sort of man.

Looking back, she saw the huddled forms of the thirty she had ushered into this wreck of a building. Most were trying to sleep, or to keep the cold and the dark away. Some were playing cards, and a few were eating cooked game roasted over a series of fire. Half the city was burning, so there was little risk of the enemy equating the smoke to the fearful residents.

It was then that her radio chirped, and she received her first communique in four days.

< < This is the dropship Tiger Tiger to all team members, we are making an emergency flyover. Once we have everyone's location we'll be sending reinforcements to augment the local militail. It looks like

we've got ourselves a limited contract. Tiger Tiger Out > >

Then it was silent again, save for the sounds of combat. As Laurentia swept her gaze across the sky, she spotted a falling star. Through her binoculars, she spotted the stubby form of the Tiger Tiger, the expedition's Leopard class jumpship descending into the night. Fire lanced out from it, carressing enemy positions with a deadly touch. then, within the barest of moments, it was past- moving over the city and to the east.

The expedition had been equipped primarily for information gathering, but to prepare for any eventuality, they were carrying several other armaments. Laurentia rolled to the side, drawing a bead on the descending parcel that had just barely made itself known with the deployment of its chute. Supplies from Tiger Tiger. Giving a small prayer to God, she lifted the tarp off the collection of crates, and stared at the gleaming form of several modified anti-tank missile launchers. Beneath them was ammunition, weaponry, food and camouflage equipment. And a note, addressed to her. It said but one word. *Survive*.

Casting her eyes once more on the battling forces below, and then to the distant star of the Tiger Tiger, Laurentia smiled. Then she stood, and headed back inside.

There was work to be done.

3rd Floor, Windswept Heights Apartments
Hoff, Federated Suns
August 13th, 2006/3021

The coin had been made as a joke- one of several. Almost solid Germanium, it was inexplicable that someone would 'waste' such a precious resource in its production. But GDI had no such qualms for thos who could afford it. Stamped with a picture of an eagle in flight on one side, and a scorpion on the other, it was a curio of sometime interest.

And it would have remained so had it not been handed off to someone else, whom knew nothing of its origin; only its fierce weight and power.

In every organization there are those who possess ambition to move beyond their station, to seek the acclaim and reward of accomplishment. So too are there those who will sacrifice their integrity for such advancement, or whom the world has forced into a situation where survival is worth more then honour. Yorimoto Ranmaru was one such man. A scientist working under geniuses, being paid less the the janitors that cleaned up the office floors, Ranmaru's days were stunningly plain.

Each moring he awoke to the first rays of the sun. He showered, and ate a small breakfast, then caught the bus down to the aerospace park. Signing in with the guard, he nodded at Laurisa, a secretary he fancied, and then headed into the lab. His boss, Dr. Jorge Belasco, was already present- the man practically lived at the lab. Jorge was the quintessential genius- while massively capable, he was also prone to eccentric habits, and possessed an infuriating lack of need to actually explain himself to his underlings. But beyond his personal quibbles, the two shared something of a friendship.

Ranmaru tried not to think about the weight of the coin, heavy in his wallet.

After logging onto the computer network and opening up a series of

programs, Ranmaru proceeded to the day's work- his job 'at the moment' (for Jorge was usually the sort to randomly reassign him), and began organizing their reserve of physical data- backups on the off chance that something went wrong. He could feel the coin, its heavy weight weighing earnestly on him. Ranmaru frowned, checked several files and procedures, then stood and made his way over to Dr. Belasco.

"Ah, Ranmaru, what can I do for you?" asked Jorge jovially. He was smiling, even as he tap tap tapped away on a keyboard, writing a report on something to do with braided myomer bundles or the like.

"I.." Ranmaru began slowly, then quieted. "I have a concern. A security concern."

The heat of the guilt he felt, centered around the coin flared, then settled into a dull pulse. Ranmaru ignored it- afterall, he was just doing his duty. What harm was it the gift he carried, a gift in return for advancing the interests of the assignment as a whole?

"I've been reviewing our security procedures as you asked, and it occurs to me that our data may be at risk," he said plainly.

"Don't worry, we have backups, and backups of those backups, if anything goes wrong, we shall simply produce one of those copies and start the day over," Belasco stated, firm in his opinion.

"All of our backups are on site," Ranmaru interjected quietly.

"On... you anticipate something?"

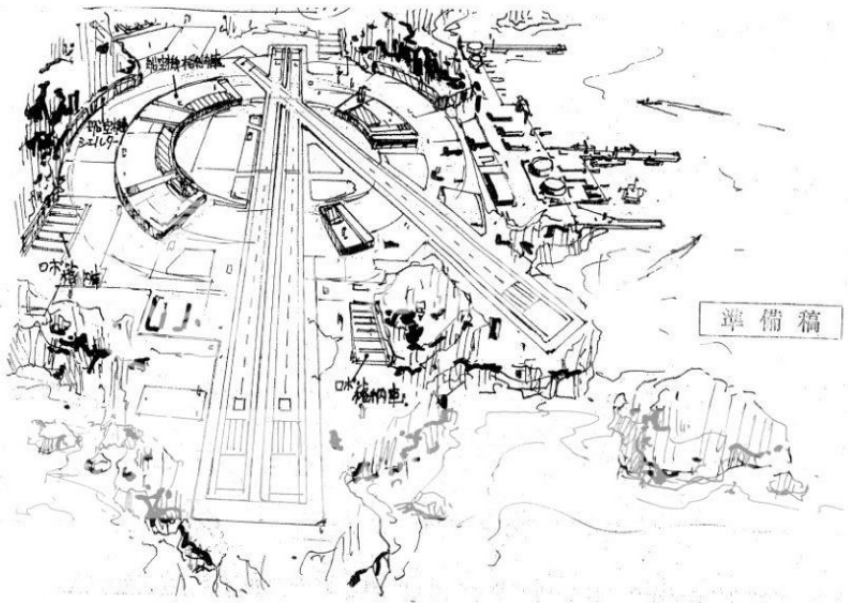
"I'd rather be prepared then caught with our pants down. We are doing sensitive research, and this world is rather close to the border. Accidents have been known to happen, and I'm merely concerned for our efforts," Ranmaru explained. "It would be a simple matter to set up a secure offsite storage, and if the worst happened, our work would not all be for naught."

Belasco frowned, his great mind putting together no doubt hundreds of scenarios and plans. His frown deepened.

"You know, Ranmaru, I think you might have a point. But perhaps we should adjourn to my office while we complete this discussion. And bring that data cube, we might have need of it," he said, turning and heading off through the haphazard mess of the Lab. Ranmaru took a deep breath, and then headed on after him. There was much to discuss. And at last, the coin was silent, the heat gone. He had done his duty, and fulfilled the first of the stranger's requests. The second, though, yet worried him, for it was far more seditious. But there was little he could do. He cursed the Combine, for it was that nation he had once called home that had put him into this situation.

Later, when he returned home that night he found a second coin, sitting serenely on his desk. There was no sign of entry or egress, and nothing else had been disturbed. He frowned, but pocketed the coin all the same. It would not be until nearly eight months later that he would be thankful of his moment of weakness. And of the Stranger's final request. In the intervening time he would become great friends with Belasco, and set aside his petty worries. And then, on a cold day in 3022, a package would arrive for him. Though its origin was unlisted, Ranmaru would know. Within the package would be a single coin, and a message with few words. So it would be that the following day Dr. Yorimoto Ranmaru invited his longtime friend and boss to take a week long vacation, to visit a conference and share time with their families. Neither would know until after, that they had been spared- by some act of fate, chance, or intervention, the fires of the Dragon.

Columbus, Northern Continent
Exploration Team Beta, Lieutenant Norris Algaute
August 30th 2006/3021



Rain. It was always the rain that brought her back. *Remembering.* Lt Norris Algaute swept her eyes across the blasted landscape. The rain fell in heavy sheets, and the distance was occluded by its prominence.

Still she listened. In the distance she could hear the sounds of the SUVs the expedition had landed, driving out and around, looking for

places they hadn't explored yet. The rain wouldn't stop them- it never did. But they didn't know it like she did. Even though a few short months ago she had never left Earth, she would know this rain forever.

Three years ago Norris had lost her entire family in the rain. A seasonal Hurricane had struck the coastline, causing millions of dollars in damage- and tearing her family away from her. They had thought themselves safe, hiding in cellar of their old house. But then Samuel, her baby brother, had run upstairs to get something he had forgotten. Her mother had chased after him, but it was too late- the storm was upon them. All Norris remembered was screaming, fighting against the winds- then nothing. When she woke up she had found herself in one of the many tent hospitals set up to provide relief. Of her family, there was no sign. Rain fell, and she remembered *everything*.

Nevertheless, Norris knew that there was no time to dwell, now, for there was still work to be done. So instead she cast one last glance across the desolate landscape, and turned back to that task. An aged and rusted metal door, barring entry to an aged and rusted metal building. Physical force failed to open the door, so there really was just one other option.

Naturally, the C4 had blasted the rusted metal door open with a solid punch of explosive force, far more then the human body would generate. Drawing her flashlight Norris stepped inside the building. The rain sounded different in here, coming down on the roof as it was. But instead of musing further, she instinctively reached for a light switch. Her hand found one- the Sphere wasn't so far away from human norms to forgo such a useful convenience, and within a few moments lights began to shed their bright illumination on the world. The facility's fusion reactor, still burning strong after all this time was finally being used. While the GDI force wasn't quite what the base had been used to, it didn't matter to the place. What was important was that they had come... home. Even the inanimate becomes accustomed to being well treated, to a human presence. And neural nets or not, after so long an absence, the base was glad- in the sense that the base could feel emotion- to have them home.

"Building SCRX343-b appears to be intact. While I had to blow through the door due to oxidization, the interior is in remarkably condition. Nothing of interest stands out as of yet, but it appears that all power systems are intact," Norris said, speaking for the benefit of the recorder more than the radio back to the Dropship. Turning over what appeared to be personal effects, and looking at old bulky computer terminals, she strode deeper into the warehouse of a room. Beyond the cubicles of computer terminals, and beyond what appeared to be an dining area there lay something of real interest- some sort of armoured vehicle. It sat on a track that led down a tunnel that vanished into darkness a ways off- probably some sort of access ramp. But the vehicle was... interesting. Large, heavily armoured, but not strictly an APC, it looked more like something that would reside in the hands of a civilian contractor than any real military force. The bars on the windows attested to that consideration.

Dusting some of the grime off the windows, she peered inside, casting the light of her flashlight into the murky interior. Two bodies long decayed stared back at her with empty eyes. Frowning, she looked down, and noticed the locking mechanism over the vehicles wheels. *What had happened here?* she wondered.

"We've got two more," she said, both for the radio and the recorder. "I'm moving to check out the next-"

And then she tensed, and whirled, leveling her firearm. There had been a noise- some sort of scrabbling, some kind of motion. But nothing awaited her gaze. But she was being watched, she could feel eyes on her.

"I am not alone- there's something in here with me," she said slowly.

< < Read you Norris, hang tight, the boys and I will be with you as soon as we can > > said the voice on the radio. But Norris was worrying more and more. Abruptly a section of the lights went out with a terrible crash of falling catwalk, and Norris spotted *something* moving in the dark. She scrambled back and fired off several shots, but they found no purchase.

There! she spotted movement again, in the dark. Something was up there, observing her. Whether animal or man, she didn't know. Then it was gone once again. Lt Norris backed herself against a wall and set her firearm to full auto. But it did her no good- the lights, all of them, went dark for a moment, and when they returned the figure was before her. She stared, eyes widening at the weapon pointed directly at her. Its bearer was a man, a very old man in a tattered uniform. But his eyes were fierce, nearly mad. With an intense gaze and focus, he aimed it at her.

"Where!" he demanded. His voice sounded like rocks grinding together, and its hoarseness shocked her. Knowing she couldn't raise her weapon before he gunned her down- *and who the hell was he?* she raised her hands.

"Norris Algaute, Global Defence Initiative, Service Number KXX1192," she said slowly. The man appeared to be mulling her answer over- but just as she thought she had an opportunity he brandished the weapon at her again.

"Where.... are you from!" he enunciated, though clearly speech was something of great difficulty for him. Now that she really looked, he appeared dessicated and gaunt, and he looked nearly eighty too.

"Earth," Norris said slowly. "We're from Earth."

"Earth?" he repeated, seemingly incredilous. But he had no chance to say more, as the rest of her team burst into the room at that moment, levelling their weapons at the stranger. He screeched, and abandoned her, ducking off into the shadows. Though their weapons tracked and then lost sight of him, they did not fire.

"Are you injured?" asked Colonel Marcus Bradshaw of Texas.

"No... just my pride. Crazy old man- how did he get here?" she asked, babbling. The stress had gotten to her, but the mystery was stronger. *How had the man gotten here?* "He was wearing some sort of uniform- I didn't get a good look, he was too busy waving that gun of his. But I think it was the same uniform as the bodies."

"Sir?" called another voice, and they both turned to see Sargeant Merrick coming out of the back of the room. He was unscathed- but he had the old man with him. Unconscious, but intact. Merrick was the team's psychological specialist. "I found him trying to get into a room when we were securing the perimeter. It looks like the door was recently opened, but it's sealed shut. We managed to taser him before he could cause any more trouble."

"Good job. Except of course that now we can't ask him any of our questions until he wakes up- like how he *got* on this dustball in the first place," Bradshaw said tersely. "Have medical rope him up and take a look at him- I want to see this room you found."

Merrick nodded, and handed the unconscious figure off to two of the other marines, whom carried him back outside. Norris, meanwhile, had managed to calm down just a bit. Bradshaw motioned for her to follow them, and after a few minutes of walking, they came across the door in question. It had no access from this side- no means of sliding it open or otherwise gaining entry to whatever it held. There were scratch marks and the like all over it. *Something* or perhaps *someone* had been trying to get in, evidently unsuccessfully. The C4 had no such trouble. But what they found on the other side was...

The team gaped, casting their gaze across the massive stack of glowing blue cylinders, each containing a hazily obscured humanoid figure. One of the cylinders, near the bottom of the stack lay haphazardly cracked open. Just one.

Bradshaw thumbed his radio.

"Command, this is Bradshaw, I think we're going to need the entire medical wing over here. I think we've just stumbled across something big. Really big."

< <How big- can you specify? > >

"I appear to be looking at approximately a hundred and fifty humans of various ages in," he paused, reaching out and feeling the cold of the glass. "What appears to be *active* cryogenic suspension. Repeat, *active* suspension. One of my men was attacked by one of them who

appears to have broken out- perhaps we set off some seismic activity when we touched down."

< < wait... what? I'm going to have to go up the chain, Colonel- if you can hang on for a moment, I'm going to need you to repeat that for the Captain. > >

"Acknowledge HQ," replied Bradshaw. What was supposed to be a simple grab and bag had just become *infinitely* more complicated.

< < Bradshaw, I'm afraid that report's going to have to wait. We just picked up the Von Braun arriving at the Nadir point. They're very *early*, and we're off to intercept them. Get your men- and your prisoner back here. We'll look at your find when we have the leisure. > >

Infinitely.

Nonstandard Point
Antallos System
Periphery
2 August 2006/3021

Space was rent asunder as multiple globes of space-time were transformed for half a minute into hyperspace, an event that radiated away waste energy in a massive pulse of electromagnetic radiation that ranged from radio to the middle visible light bands. When the hyperspace bubbles retreated from its intrusion into regular space-time, each one left behind an intact Jumpship with their limpet Dropships. Immediately on emergence, the Dropships began disconnecting for the trip to Antallos.

The GDI mission planners had chosen the non-standard jump point for a reason. First, unlike a pirate point, it was no more complicated to plot a jump to than the standard Zenith and Nadir jump points; the point the GDI fleet emerged at was along the border of the what was popularly becoming known as the "Jump Limit", the area of space defined by the local star's gravity well where KF jumps transitioned from "unsafe" to "safe". Second, the point used was marginally closer to Antallos' current position, knocking nearly a day off transit time to the planet. Third, it avoided any possible complications dealing with any non-GDI jumpships at the standard points.

Their emergence zone was clear and appeared secure. The Jumpships deployed their sails as the Dropships maneuvered out of the way before cranking transit drives to a full gravity. And as they maneuvered, one Dropship sent a signal to Antallos announcing their arrival to the spec ops team already on planet. Hopefully, the local "powers that be" in Port Krin would fail to notice the signal.

Dropship *Commodore Perry*
Inbound, Antallos
Periphery
3 August 2006/3021

It was good to have gravity back, General Davis mused as he entered the *Commodore Perry's* bridge. The novelty one tenth gravity of

Jumpship station keeping had pretty much worn off after the first week. No one had really any idea what such cramped conditions would mean for ships packed with bored troops that could barely train properly in such cramped confines. Luckily, his people had managed to hold off a full blown riot. Now with gravity back, NCOs and officers were working to get everyone back into shape.

"Good morning, General," said the *Perry's* captain, Colonel Chou Kurita in slightly accented English. A former member of the Japanese Defense Force, the man was also the grandson of Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita, the commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy's 2nd Fleet during World War II, *the same Kurita that the ruling family of the Draconis Combine claimed descent from.*

Davis wonder who the hell had picked him as his flagship CO and why. Chou Kurita was a competent and conscientious officer from what Davis could see, but hardly exceptional. There were plenty of other officers who could have been slotted into the position. And having a Kurita in the Expeditionary Force could create all kinds of political complications that Davis didn't want to think about.

"Morning, Colonel," Davis replied, letting none of his thoughts show. "Any sign that we've been noticed, yet?"

"No, sir," Kurita answered. "We noticed a Jumpship jump out at the Zenith point at 0210 and another one jump in from the Nadir at 0835. From what we can tell, this appears to be normal traffic."

"Excuse me, sirs?" Tech Sergeant Andrea Duvall called from her station. "CIC reports that the new arrival at the Nadir point has launched three Dropships towards Antallos. They're tentatively ID'd as three *Overlords*, ETA to Antallos is 4 days."

"*Overlords*?" Davis echoed. According to the briefings, *Overlords* were damned rare outside of House militaries and any but the largest merc units. "I'm going to take a wild guess and say that we're not the only ones interested in invasion here."

"Do you think this is part of a follow up invasion on Earth, sir?" Kurita asked, concerned.

"I hope not," Davis said grimly. "But if it is, we're going to have to dissuade them... forcefully if necessary." He gave a short, humorless laugh. "On the plus side, we'll be on planet a couple days ahead of them to prepare."

Dropship *Commordore Perry*
Inbound, Antallos
Periphery
4 August 2006/3021

Freefall had returned. It was only a temporary shut down of the transit drive to allow the Dropships of the GDI Expeditionary Force to turn around so they could begin the deceleration phase of their journey. It wasn't like those science fiction shows where ships could just pop out of FTL into orbit. In the real world – for certain values of "real" in this crazy universe – traveling for hours and days was a necessity of space travel just to reach the places where FTL was possible.

But General Davis didn't have time to ponder such trivialities at the moment.

"Another fleet?" he said disbelievingly.

"Yes, sir," Kurita confirmed. "CIC makes it out as two *Overlords*, two *Unions*, and an *Excalibur*."

"Do we have any idea who these guys are?" Davis asked. What kind of Dropship was an *Excalibur*? He made a mental note to look it up later. The question was whether he should just scrub the entire mission. The idea made him uneasy; abandoning the mission would pretty much guarantee that Earth would turtle up and virtually give up the stars.

"Yes, sir," Kurita answered. "Communication intercepts between Force Alpha and Force Bravo indicate that Bravo is from the Federated Suns. Alpha belongs to," he grimaced, "the Draconis Combine."

"How sure are we of this information?"

"Pretty certain," Kurita said with a wan smile. "The insults being tossed back and forth were pretty clear."

Dropship *Commordore Perry*
Inbound, Antallos
Periphery
5 August 2006/3021

"...reports multiple KF signatures detected at the Antallos/sun pirate point," Kurita was reporting.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Davis muttered to himself. "When the hell did this place become Grand Central Station?" The Expeditionary Force was pretty much committed to landing on Antallos now; they were damn near in orbit. "Never mind, don't answer that. What else have you got?"

"New arrivals have been tagged as Force Charlie," Kurita continued. "They broadcasted a message to Port Krin identifying themselves as 'Ryan's Rebels' and demanded the coordinates to 'Motherload'. The consequences of failing to do so were pretty graphic."

"Who the hell are Ryan's Rebels?" Davis asked.

"According to our sourcebooks, they are one of the nastiest pirate groups to infest the universe," Kurita replied. He smiled humorlessly. "They're led by a man named 'Redjack Ryan'."

"Please don't tell me he's some alternate universe counterpart of our own President," Davis growled. "That's like something out of badly written science fiction."

"I am only reporting the facts, sir," Kurita said dispassionately. "Although I suppose I could point out that the past year and a half could have been taken straight from..."

"Sirs," Duvall interrupted. "Update from CIC. Force Alpha has changed course to intercept Force Charlie's Jumpships. Force Charlie is sending Dropships in to Antallos and will arrive about six hours

behind us. And we've received a message from Port Krin; they've ID'd our Dropships as the same ones that were sent to Earth last year, but the content of the message indicates that we're still under the original owners' control."

"Hmm..." Davis said thoughtfully. "Quick, Sergeant, get me the Battalion commanders and Dropship COs ASAP. But I need the First Mech Battalion's Major Azim first."

"We're going with Plan B, sir?" Kurita asked.

"Plan C actually," Davis replied with a shark toothed smile. "All hail the conquering heroes."

DropShip *Distant Home*
Inbound, Antallos
Mess Hall
August 4th 2006/3021

Stadele was thinking about the brigade exercise they had held on the way to the mess hall. The last exercise had ended with a costly, but definite victory for BlueForce. And it had impressed Staedele. Not only had the Mech battalion managed to become a well coordinated force, on par with many IS regulars at least, the coordination between the units of the brigade was better than what he had ever witnessed in such a big unit throughout his entire career. And their artillery was almost unreal. That was fine by him. The more support, the merrier. Losing his lance of Thumpers on Thestria was one of the bigger blows they had been dealt on that day and Staedele had missed proper artillery support ever since. Now he had it back, and then some. 'Well, another thing to invest our earnings in', he thought.

With the sheer noise of all the people crowding the mess hall, he only noticed Captain Johnson when his infantry CO sat down next to him and started digging into his dish. "Any news, Marc?"

Johnson first tried to say something, but then decided that chewing and swallowing had a higher priority. Staedele laughed. And he could understand Johnson. They had managed to buy a whole load of fresh foodstuffs from civilian sources back on Earth (that name still caused the Major to briefly hesitate) which quite likely, in combination with the kitchen staff under Auntie Hanna, made their canteen serving what was the perhaps best meals in the entire fleet. It certainly did help them to endear the two companies of GDI infantrymen they were carrying now instead of their dependents. And it helped their guests to get comfortable in the pretty cramped quarters that amount of personnel caused.

Thinking about the dependents briefly made Staedele's mind digress back to Earth. Having to leave Esther behind was something that was painful for everyone involved. The dusk before they left, his daughter had thrown a massive tantrum because she didn't want her parents to leave, especially as it was the first time for that to happen. The first

time after Thestria. It was just logical. Many of the children of the Cav had lost one, in two cases even both, of their parents. And now, they were afraid that it could happen again. In the end, he and Marie had managed to calm down his daughter. She, as well as the other children that had all their relatives join the flight to Antallos, would be taken care of by Miss Avilés, the old nurse that had been watching these kids for decades. He **did** have to promise Esther something, though. First, to safely come back. Second, to buy her some gaming console they built on earth. Xbox something or so. Ever after some of the Army personnel on the base had invited her to a game while they waited for her mother to collect her from her latest expedition to discover their new home, she hadn't stopped talking about it.

Johnsons voice brought him back to reality. "They found out who the other guys that arrived in-system are."

"Let me guess, Marc. Davion and Kurita."

"That's right, Andy. How did you know?"

"Doesn't take a genius for that one. An *Excalibur*, two Overlords and two Unions? That's a freakin' RCT right there, simple as that. And the other group? Three fully loaded Overlords, going by their flight profiles. The only one besides Davion that would have a force like that flying around out here is Kurita. Let me guess, they're right now busy throwing insults back and forth?"

Johnson only nodded. Staedele made a grimace and cursed. "Joy! Whatever they want, we will now land on that mudball and have two of the Great Houses playing their old game of kicking each other into the curb right next door. And freakin' Dracs to boot. **Sigh** Ever since Thestria, Murphy seems to take personal offence to our continued existence, eh? I just wonder what the hell they want out here."

Mess Hall
August 5th, 2006/3021

"Andreas, we have another arrival, this time on the Antallos/Sun pirate point", his aunt said over the intercom.

"You've got to be kidding me! Why did nobody tell me that this place became the freakin' Triad since our last stay? Any idea on who the new guys are, Hanna?"

"Oh, you're going to love this. They identified themselves as Ryan's Rebels."

Staedele searched his memories for a fraction of a second for that name. Then it clicked.

"Redjack Ryan? That bastard? Here? What the hell is..... wait. Wait, let me think. Ahhhhhh, now it makes sense."

"Andreas?"

"It just dawned on me why we suddenly have all these DropShips full of military hardware on course to Antallos. Think about it. Take the time any message about *Motherload* would take to reach Ryan and the time it would take him to pack up all his stuff and you get an estimated travel time for him to arrive here and now. The fucking moron must have gone straight through half the damn Combine to get here this fast! Given his reputation, it's pretty clear that he made a few "supply runs" on his way over here. Which, of course, caused someone in the DCMS to blow one hell of a fuse. That's why Kurita has an entire regiment out here. They want Redjack's head on a pike. No idea why the Feddies are here, though. Perhaps they heard about *Motherload*, too. Or perhaps they're here because MIIO got wind of the Drac's troop movements. Or both."

"Hmmm, can't find anything wrong with that, Andreas. Sounds pre... wait, I'm getting a call from the *Perry*."

A few seconds later, she was back on the intercom.

"Andreas, please get up to the bridge. General Davis is calling all battalion commanders and DropShip CO's for a radio conference. He doesn't sound happy."

'He's not the only one', Staedele thought, 'this situation is quickly

turning into a goddamn powder keg.'

The small voice in the back of his head telling him he forgot something went by unheard.

Port Krin
Antallos
August 6 2006/3021

"So, if we're taking preemptive control of all of the dropships at the port, how exactly does this make us different from the 'mercenary pirate scum' you've been bitching about since I got captured?" Jankowski asked as he moved his Battlemaster into position.

"There's an incredibly complex socio-political explanation attached to that, but the short version is that we're not getting a share of the loot." 1st Lieutenant Dansel replied as he double checked the positioning of his lance. Somehow, and he really didn't want to think about the brain damage or drug abuse that had resulted in the decision, he'd ended up as the only Earth-born officer with three former pirates directly under his command. Where all of the Earth-born pilots had a backseater to overcome the deficiencies caused by their inexperience in mech combat, it was tacitly understood that the backseaters for the defectors were there primarily as an additional security measure.

"Then why the hell are we even doing this shit if we aren't getting paid extra?"

The text display feeding to the rest of the lance from Brox's assault mech lit up with the words 'I'm here because your momma begged me for a few months rest before I killed her'. The mute pilot remained a mystery wrapped inside an enigma, but somehow he'd become convinced that 'Your momma' jokes represented the pinnacle of humor.

"You know Jankowski, I've gone over your Battle Roms, and I don't remember you bitching about the pay scale when you tried to DFA that Corsair from the top of a skyscraper." The incident in question had merely been the capper to Jankowski's contribution to the Battle for Toronto, which had cemented the decision to put him in Dansel's lance, to, as one officer put it 'try to keep all the crazy away from the rest of us'.

"I was just jumping close for a point blank shot as it flew by, nothing more."

"Yeah, sure, that's why you were screaming 'Eat Commando Boot Asshole' on the way down. Silence on the net now, They're almost here." 'They' referred to the regiment of mechs, tentatively identified as Redjack Ryan's group backed by Wilson's Hussars, which was bearing down on the port. Apparently they'd arrived literally mere hours before the GDI expeditionary force's combat arm, and landed in a nearby Free Zone rather than brave the substantial anti-air defenses of Port Krin in a hot-drop.

The actual operation to take down Vorax and sabotage Port Krin's defenses had gone off practically without a hitch, as had the initial follow-up invasion. In fact, the invasion had succeeded on its short term objectives better than the planners could ever have dreamed, since the arriving dropships had been hailed as reinforcements against Ryan's horde before they could even hit ground and start demanding Vorax's head. Then, due to a communications foul-up, the faked ninja team had gone ahead with their tasking without hearing about any of recent events, grabbing Vorax and his files and rendering a large portion of the Port Krin Militia non-functional in the short term. Perversely, the fact that their cover had been solid and the Port's focus on external defense had made their job a cakewalk as well. It was then that everything started going spectacularly off the rails.

As the covert insertion dropship still in orbit with faked hull integrity damage looked on, a massed formation poured out of cover, taking Vorax's silence and the wild rumors being broadcast as the signal that it was their chance to attempt to take the port. Still more purposeful movement in the wasteland indicated that the other city states had been moving their forces nearby to capitalize on any fighting that might erupt. Even worse, a Kuritan task force had arrived in system and landed in another Free Zone, with another, not readily identifiable force landing nearby. All in all, it was shaping up to be the kind of epic clusterfuck that the History Channel would devote entire weeks to covering in excruciating detail.

The voice of General Don Davis came over the net, as Ryan's forces

closed with the wall. "Charlie Company, start the ball as soon as you have visual. All other forces, hold position."

Rejack Ryan was having the time of his life. If his narcissistic ego had been in any need of reinforcement, the fact that the defenders of Port Krin were leaderless, demoralized, and unable to even start a fraction of their equipment would have handily done the job. As it was, he simply took it as his due that the universe revolved around making him look good. He chuckled as his forces approached the wall, assured that if there had been any coherent defense, they would surely make use of that position rather than letting him in uncontested.

"Right, send the newbies over the wall, the rest of you lot, start opening us some holes." As his Renegades and Wilson's Hussars drew up to a halt and started pounding the fortification with their energy batteries, a lance of the newest, most ill-regarded recruits piloting captured Kuritan light mechs jumped over it. Moments later, the sounds of explosions echoing from inside the Port, along with the panicked screaming over the radio let him know that it wasn't going to be a complete cakewalk. Still, the limited data gathered by Pawn Lance's sensors showed that it couldn't be much more than a company shooting from long range, probably those jokers returned from Motherload caught before they could reach the best spot to try to hold him off.

"Pour it on you scum, crack me that wall and don't spare the ammo!" Under the increased pounding, the wall quickly gave way in several places, and the next group of not particularly well-regarded pirates were sent through, with the others crowding behind them. They were met by a storm of long-ranged fire from what turned out to be a damned heavy reinforced company, if Ryan wasn't mistaken the smallest mech out there was a Hunchback, and it was the *only* thing lighter than a heavy mech on the field. Still, there were only sixteen of them, and the thought of being able to upgrade from his Quickdraw to one of those Battlemasters was enough to banish any caution from his mind.

"Full speed, charge those bastards and bring them down, and the Port is ours! A double share to the first man who brings down one of those Battlemasters intact for me next ride!" With a wordless snarling howl, the forces surged forward, slowly closing on their prey. Said prey continued to move backwards at a walking pace, repeatedly hammering their closest pursuers with cursed accurate long-range fire, while most of the shots at them went wild. Still, even though they left a dozen pirates broken and burning on the pavement, they were unable to claim more even a tithe of the attackers, and their armor damage mounted as their pursuers closed to more effective range.

"One last push and we're all over them lads! Char-"

At that moment, his mech computer lovingly maintained by his techs on pain of excruciating death began chiming warnings that rapidly ran together in an incoherent stream: "Tag Lock-on dete-Fusion Plant activation detect-Ballistic artillery inb-Fusion Plant ac-Tag Lock-on-Balli-Tag-Fus-". He cursed and reduced the warnings to a text display on his HUD, which resolved into three lines:

Tag Lock-on detected-multiple targeting emitters
Ballistic Artillery inbound- greater than 100 projectiles
Fusion Plant Activation detected- At least thirty point sources.

"Oh Bugger Me Sideways" Ryan said as the steel rain began to fall.

The term was 'Time on Target', a technique evolved to maximize the first punch provided by artillery before its victim could attempt to respond. Normally, for a twenty-first century First World military this was a trivial exercise in computing. Normally, however, a time on target was limited to tube and rocket platforms whose computers had been carefully designed to seamlessly mesh together. In this case, the need to include missiles delivered from the grounded dropships, as well as a coordinated Hellfire strike from the attached Apache battalion, in addition to timing it to coincide with the fusion plant

start-up time of the previously concealed Battlemechs had required a great deal of careful preparation, and more than a little careless and desperate jury-rigging.

However, the term for the result of all that effort was 'Holocaust'. With the added fire of GDI's tank and mech units, it became synonymous with Armageddon for the luckless pirates caught in the middle. All semblance of order broke down, aided by the fact that Ryan's *Quickdraw* had been identified and targeted with extreme prejudice. A number of mechs charged forward in an attempt to close the distance, some attempted to retreat, while others milled about in confusion shooting at any target that presented itself.

The mechs that closed were met with the combined short range firepower of GDI's 1st Mech battalion, along with concentrated Javelins from the infantry that were otherwise keeping their heads down. Those that stayed in place were savaged by artillery, then ravaged by tank cannons and fire support mechs, with Merkava's unchivalrously firing in unison as companies on single targets. Those that retreated through the artillery curtain were repeatedly hammered by missiles. The converted Leopard gunship soon took off, and smashed at their battered remnants as they continued to flee, until the last mech lay crumpled in the dirt outside the Port.

Even though it was an utter slaughter, the sheer toughness of Battlemechs meant that it wasn't all one-sided. By chance, a dozen pirates happened to concentrate their fire on a single luckless Shadow Hawk, blasting apart its cover and hammering through its armor to detonate the ammunition for its autocannon. The Commando captured at Auckland attempted to jump clear of an incoming firestorm, but mistimed it, and crashed leglessly to the ground mere meters away, even as an Awesome from Wilson's Hussars waded through a torrent of fire. Shrugging off an even dozen 120 mm rounds, it leveled its weapons at the *Quickdraw* captured in Oregon. In a fit of perverse irony, it neatly decapitated the mech for the second time in its life with a single shot, firmly cementing the *Quickdraw* as the least desired Mech in the entirety of GDI.

As more and more units shifted to aim at it, it fired again, smashing the gyro of an already damaged Cicada. With the entirety of Charlie

Company firing into it, along with an entire battalion of tanks, it finally went down, but not before delivering one last spiteful volley to obliterate the turret of one of the Merkavas.

"All right!" Jankowski cheered as the last pirate Stinger was brought down despite its frantic dodging, joining the excited babble on the Charlie Company net.

Dansel cut across the uproar "Cancel that noise, that was the easy part. Anyone else who tries their luck won't come in as stupidly, and even if they did, we don't have the ammunition to do that more than one more time. Natalie, you took the most armor damage, get your ass back on the dropship for repairs."

Major Hajji Aladdin Al Azim smiled slightly, the lieutenant was coming along nicely, and it was good to know that he could participate in a fight without unwarranted insanity. "Indeed, save the self-congratulations for the victory party. All units below 62% armor integrity to the dropships for priority repair."

Looking at his armor display readout of 61.7%, 1st Lieutenant Tony Dansel barely managed to restrain himself from making a sarcastic retort.

Port Krin
Antallos
6 August 3021

"Sir, we're picking up an incoming aircraft. CIC makes it out as a *Boomerang* spotter plane."

"One of Redjack Ryan's people coming in for a look see?" General Davis asked. That could be a problem. A recon plane might spot the hidden units laying in wait for the pirate mechs, but shooting down the plane could give the game away as well.

"Negative, sir," came the reply. "The *Boomerang* appears to have originated from Force Bravo's LZ. Should we shoot it down?"

"Remind me, are *Boomerangs* manned?" Davis asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Damn." The Davion forces had so far avoided contact with GDI, preferring to skirmish with the Kuritan forces. But shooting down and likely killing one of their pilots would likely provoke them into attacking. Davis would prefer keeping the number of people he had to fight down to a minimum. "No," Davis decided. "Let them look. As long as they make no hostile moves towards us, we'll return the favor."

Headquarters Tent
Davion Light Guards Base Camp
Sea of Despair
Antallos
6 August 3021

"That was neatly executed," observed Marshal Jonathan Riffenberg, commanding officer of the Davion Light Guards Regimental Combat Team, as he watched the surveillance transmission. The Port Krin defenders who had identified themselves as the "GDI" had just sprung a trap on Redjack Ryan's pirates, using their own heavy and assault mechs as bait. Once in the kill zone Ryan's tightly packed mechs were

bombarded by from all directions including above; these GDI people had a large amount of ballistic and missile artillery and were using it liberally.

"Marshall, GDI forces have just launched three *Leopards*," Riffenberg's aide, Major Carlos Davion, announced. Carlos Davion was a minor scion of the Federated Suns' ruling House only distantly related to the Prince. Like many Davions before him, he had chosen to enter military service.

"Dropping mechs behind the pirates to seal them in, eh?" Riffenberg guessed. Whoever the GDI leader was, he was very good, at least as far as battle planning was.

"Doesn't look like it, sir," Davion replied. "The *Leopards* are taking up a holding pattern around the battlefield, just out of LRM range."

"They can't be about to use them to do strafing runs," Riffenberg said doubtfully. "Dropships are far too valuable for that, even *Leopards*."

In the display, a pirate mech broke away from the packed mob getting slaughtered by mass fire. The *Wolverine* had barely taken three steps when it was torn apart by three streams of autocannon shells. Moments later, what remained was shredded by artillery strikes.

"Blake's Blood!" Davion swore. "That was from the *Leopards*!"

"So they are strafing the battle?" Riffenberg said, surprised.

"Uh, no sir," Davion said, checking a different monitor. "It looks like... it looks like they're still circling, but they're firing broadside."

"*Leopards* don't have broadside armament," Riffenberg pointed out.

"I know, sir," Davion agreed. "But it looks like these ones do. Look."

The main display changed to show a single GDI *Leopard*. It was flying canted slightly on its side, muzzle flashes and tracers vomiting from what should have been the mech bay doors. Riffenberg grunted in

understanding; this GDI had simply ripped out the mech handling equipment and stuffed the bays full of guns and ammo. It was crude but apparently effective.

"Switch back to the battle," Rittenberg ordered. "What kind of armament are we looking at?"

"Um, from the range, I'd say we're looking at massed class two autocannons backed by some artillery tubes, probably *Snipers* or *Thumpers*," Davion guessed. "I suppose they could have carried something heavier, but I don't think they want to give their targets much chance to shoot back."

Rittenberg grunted in agreement – the reasoning made perfect sense – as he watched the unfolding slaughter. More mechs broke away from the back of the pirate formation, and they were promptly cut down one by one by the *Leopards*. It took a moment for Rittenberg to figure out was bothering him about that. Then he realized what it was; the *Leopards* were cutting apart the runners one by one, shooting each one in unison and switching from target to target in concert. It was a frightening display of timing and coordination for an old mechwarrior like himself.

"How are they doing that?" he muttered as a *Rifleman* was shredded by what should have been one of the laughably weakest heavy weapons in the Inner Sphere.

Headquarters Tent
Davion Light Guards Base Camp
Sea of Despair
Antallos
7 August 3021

Rittenberg was reviewing the report from the latest "probe" at the Drac regiment on planet. According to intel, the 6th Pesht Regulars were one of the Combine's forces used to garrison rear areas generally not under threat from anyone but pirates. As such, troop quality was a bit uneven as they had both aged veterans and green mechwarriors. The most recent action managed to mousetrap a lance of *Dragons* and had managed to disable two for only the loss of a

single *Locust* and some hovertanks.

"Sir, new report," Major Davion announced. "The GDI have been engaged by new forces."

"New forces?" Rittenberg repeated. "Who are they and where did they come from?"

"We're not sure," Davion said. "Intercepts suggest that they're a mix of independent pirates, mercenaries, and regulars from the other Antallos City-States."

"On this planet, there's not much difference between the three," Rittenberg commented. "How many are we talking about here?"

"It's hard to say, Marshall," Davion replied. "They're using hit and run tactics against the GDI, so it's difficult to get a hard count. Although we did notice one thing right away."

"What's that, Major?"

"Their counter-battery artillery fire is just unreal," Davion said, shaking his head. "Despite being obviously surprised, the GDI managed to return fire against a City-State's artillery unit before the latter's first shots even hit them."

"How did they do that?" Rittenberg asked.

Headquarters Tent

Davion Light Guards Base Camp

Sea of Despair

Antallos

8 August 3021

The mech lance picked its way through the bottom of an ancient, rubble strewn canal completely out of sight of anyone on the surface. The mechs were a standard motley collection of missile boats led by an obviously jury rigged hybrid pieced together from bits of Marauders and Catapults. As one, they paused, turned and fired a wave of missiles into the air at seeming nothing.

Three clicks away, a short lance of light mechs of dubious allegiance had been playing tag with a company of primitive looking tanks. They were suddenly torn apart when a rain of missiles came down on them from out of nowhere. Shards of armor and even whole body parts were flung in all directions as missile after missile slammed home with murderous accuracy.

The surveillance video playback paused.

"How did they do that?" Marshal Riffenberg wondered aloud. It was becoming a depressingly familiar phrase.

"Sir?" Major Davion asked. "It just looks like indirect fire, nothing special compared to what we've already seen them do. In fact, whoever these GDI people are, indirect fire is apparently a specialty of theirs."

"I suppose," Riffenberg acknowledged. It had quickly become obvious to Riffenberg, if not the locals, that if you engaged these people in combat, you'd be fighting every one of them in shooting distance whether they were in line of sight or not. "But I still want to know how these GDI people manage to do that," Riffenberg continued. "Indirect fire and artillery are supposed to be inaccurate, not least because targets have a tendency to move before anything fired could have a chance to hit them. That's not what's happening here."

"I'll admit it looks pretty nasty, sir," Davion said. "But I'm not sure I see the significance. Maybe it's some kind of lostech?"

"If it were just lostech, I wouldn't be so concerned," Riffenberg said. "It's also their coordination. Like us, they follow a combined arms doctrine. They have to; their indirect fire accuracy would be impossible otherwise. And the scary thing is that it looks like any unit they're fielding can act as a spotter."

"Surely not, sir," Davion scoffed. "You can't fight a battle and spot for indirect fire at the same time."

"No, Major?" Riffenberg said. "Then look through the hours of

surveillance footage that we've accumulated and show me which GDI units are taking time out to act as spotter."

"Um..."

"I'll tell you right now, you won't find one," Riffenberg said. "I certainly couldn't find any."

Oxford Campus
London
Great Britain
Earth
7 August 2006

"So what happened here?" Inspector James asked the shell shocked physicist.

"We..." Professor Samuel Grayson began. He stopped, swallowed, and then started again. "You have to understand, we've been trying to get working fusion for years."

"Go on," James encouraged.

"Well, a few months back, we started reconstruction of the test reactor," Grayson continued. "Studying the BT reactors gave us clues and showed us the holes in our previous theories and other factors we never accounted for. We worked out the new math and rebuilt the test reactor to take advantage of that. Last night, we turned on the test reactor to see if it would finally output more energy than what we put into it."

He turned to look at where the High Energy Physics building used to be. In its place was a raging inferno consuming a shell of a building, flames licking out from windows and a thick column of smoke climbing towards the sky. Around it, firefighting crews were busy trying to contain the flames and limit their expansion to the rest of the campus. Even as he watched, a creak and groan signaled the start of the building's collapse inward on itself.

"Let me guess," Inspector James said. "It worked?"

"Yes it did," Grayson said, nodding. "The output was a bit greater than what we anticipated." He shook his head sadly and muttered to himself. "Good thing we backup data offsite in real time. Maybe we can figure out where things went wrong."

Port Krin Outskirts

Antallos

7 August 3021

Back during the days of the Star League, Antallos had been the trade center for this little corner of the Periphery. Port Krin alone had boasted a far higher population than the entire planet did today. But war and time had taken their toll and Port Krin was only a shadow of its former glory. Today, the inhabited city was surrounded by ruins of more prosperous times, most of which was buried by desert sand. But here and there, enough of a multistory structure survived to poke above ground.

This particular one made an excellent vantage point for the ongoing battle. The holo-camera panned across the vista, paying particularly close attention to the tracer fire of bullets and the occasional flash of laser or rocket being exchanged back and forth. In the corner of its point of view, a fair, dark haired woman was speaking.

"...battle is in its second day as the mysterious GDI fends off yet another attack by Port Krin's enemies," the woman was saying. "General consensus among the people of Port Krin is that the GDI is all that stands between them and looting, rapine, and pillaging by the other City-States. What no one seems to be wondering is why this GDI is even trying to..."

"Who the hell are you?" someone broke in. The camera spun around to focus on a squad of armed soldiers in GDI combat dress. They had apparently come up the stairs behind them and were now pointing weapons at the people on the roof.

The woman was completely unphased. "Lois Lane, New Avalon Press," she said, introducing herself. "Can I ask you or your people a few questions, sir?"

"Lois..." the apparent leader began, then cut himself off. The name tag on his helmet read WAYNE. "You're a reporter?"

"Yes, I'm a reporter," Lois said. "Now about those questions..."

"Lois Lane?" one of the other soldiers laughed. "Is Clark Kent around?"

We could use his help right about now."

"Who?" Lois said, confused.

"Can it, Dickens!" Wayne growled out. "We got a battle to fight! Dickens, take that wall. Timothy, over there! Rhodes, over there! Move it people!"

Soldiers scrambled over to the locations pointed out by Wayne.

"Ma'am, you should really get back to Port Krin where it's safe," Wayne told the reporter.

"I'm not going anywhere," Lois said stubbornly. "This is where the story is and I mean to get it."

"Reporters!" Wayne said exasperated. "And here I thought we lucked out on not getting any."

"Now listen, Mister Wayne..." Lois began.

"Corporal," Wayne corrected.

"Now listen, Corporal Wayne," Lois began again. "Let us stay and I promise I won't get in your way. Besides, it's probably safer here than exposing ourselves wandering around outside."

"Miss Lane..."

"Corporal!" Dickens shouted from his position. "I got an enemy mech in sight! Looks like one of those *Robotech* knockoffs."

"I see it, too," Timothy added. "It's either a *Stinger* or *Wasp*. Wait, definitely a *Wasp*. It's got that dual missile launcher in the leg."

"What idiot puts a missile launcher in a leg?" Dickens asked, aggrieved.

"Don't know. Don't care," Wayne said, moving up behind Dickens and looking over his shoulder. Lois and her cameraman did the same.

There was indeed a Battlemech out there in moving among the ruins; it fired its rifle-like arm laser at something. "Dickens, get ready to lase it."

"Roger, Corporal," Dickens said, fiddling with some boxy attachment on his rifle.

"Alpha Foxtrot, this is India Sierra One Niner," Wayne said, keying a small radio mounted on the left breast of his combat armor. "Call for fire. Over."

"India Sierra One Niner, this is Alpha Foxtrot One Three," came the prompt reply. "Call for fire received. Over."

"Target is one light mech," Wayne continued. "Grid Two Five Bravo Lima. Request copperhead. Over."

"Grid Two Five Bravo Lima received." There was a slight pause. "Rounds away. Splash in three five seconds...mark."

More seconds passed with Wayne studying not the battlefield or the mech, but a small timepiece on his wrist. After what seemed like forever, he spoke again, but not to the radio.

"Begin lasing," Wayne ordered.

"Lasing now," Dickens acknowledged. He hunched down and aimed his rifle at the *Wasp*.

The action made no sense to Lois. Was he going to shoot a *battlemech* with a rifle? What could that possibly do? Lois opened her mouth to ask what they were doing. She never got the chance.

The *Wasp* was suddenly wreathed in explosions and flying shards of armor. The mech seemed to visibly disintegrate under the abuse. In moments, a pile of smoldering junk replaced the formerly might machine of war.

Lois gawked a moment, unsure of what she actually saw. Then she turned to her cameraman.

"Jimmy, tell me you got that!" she said excitedly.

Above Port Krin
Upper Atmosphere
Antallos
8 August 3021

Chu-i Bryan Hu flew his *Shilone* high above the modified *Leopard*. Much as it irritated him, Hu's orders were to observe this "GDI" in action only. He was only to attack if attacked first. So far, the most hostile action any GDI unit had taken against him was to ping him with radar and lidar. They had henceforth ignored him, as if he were of no significance! The contempt of such an action had rubbed his honor raw, and he itched to arm his weapon and fire on them. But he was a Samurai, and held his peace because that was what he had been ordered to do.

Down below, a pair of antique *Sabre* aerospace fighters bore down on the ungainly *Leopard*. Well, if Hu couldn't fight the GDI himself, he could at least observe how they fought against an aerial opponent, even if said opponents were little better than pirates. Would that curious broadside armament be any good in an air battle?

New blips appeared on Hu's radar, drawing his attention away from the coming battle below to his own situation up here.

"Hu," called his wingman. "I see a pair of Davion *Lucifers* coming directly toward us."

"I see them, too," Hu agreed. "Their intent is obviously hostile. So of course, we must defend ourselves, just as we have been ordered."

"Well reasoned, Hu," the wingman chuckled. "To battle then!"

The battle was short and sharp, a high speed pass of exchanged fire. The Davions broke and ran after suffering heavy damage. Hu himself suffered heavy damage while his wingman was shot down entirely. Regretfully, Hu's damage was enough that he had to return back to base camp for repairs and ammo.

Glancing back down below, he saw that the *Sabres* were no longer in

the sky, and that the GDI *Leopard* was heading back to Port Krin trailing a good deal of smoke and debris.

Headquarters Tent
6th Pesht Regulars Base Camp
Sea of Despair
Antallos
8 August 3021

"Tai-sa, why have you not ordered an attack?"

Tai-sa Ulysses Kurita looked up from his study of the latest reports. Only one man in the Sixth Pesht Regulars would dare to take such an imperious tone with him. And that man was not a Regular. He was Harmon Gonzo, the Regiment's ISF liaison and political taskmaster. And in Ulysses' opinion, Gonzo-san was an idiot, shuffled off to backwater units like the Sixth so that he could not cause greater harm to the Dragon in more important positions.

"Attack, Gonzo Harmon-san?" Ulysses said slowly, filling his voice with feigned puzzlement. "Who would I want to possibly attack?"

"Why, the enemies of the Dragon of course!" Gonzo said, exasperated. "That is your entire purpose, old man!"

"Is it truly?" the elderly Tai-sa said in exaggerated astonishment.

"Dear me, my memories must be playing tricks on me in my old age. I would have sworn that the purpose of the DCMS was to protect the worlds and people of the Combine. Are you saying that has changed, Gonzo-sama?"

"Yes! I mean no!" Gonzo sputtered. "I mean that your purpose of defending the Combine will be best accomplished by attacking and destroying the Combine's enemies," he explained slowly as if to a child... or a senile old man. "The Coordinator himself has ordered it!"

"Ah, pardon my mistake, Gonzo-san," Ulysses replied. "I thought the Coordinator had ordered something else. Now where did I put that letter? Ah, here it is. Let us see. 'Ensure the destruction of the pirates known as Ryan's Rebels.'" Ulysses called up an image of a field strewn

with broken battlemechs. "Ah, I see that has been done already."

"But we were the ones that were supposed to do that!" the ISF man objected.

"Were we?" Ulysses said. "Dear me, that's not in this message." He turned to an aide. "Tai-i Morrison, please draft a complaint to Comstar about sending us incomplete messages."

"Of course, Tai-sa."

"Good, good." Ulysses said, nodding dramatically. He turned back to Gonzo. "I trust that addresses all your complaints, Gonzo-san?"

"What about the Davions?" Gonzo asked. "They are enemies to be driven from Combine worlds!"

"Odd, has Antallos added to the Combine?" Ulysses said with mock confusion. He sighed. "We always seem to get those memos late."

"No, Antallos isn't in the Combine!" Gonzo replied. "What does it matter? They're Davions! They are the enemy and must be destroyed!"

"Well, if Antallos isn't part of the Combine," Ulysses mused. "I see no reason to defend the place from the Davions. On the other hand, I'm not totally ignoring them either."

"What? By sending green warriors in penny packets at them?" Gonzo said incredulously. "You accomplish nothing there."

"On the contrary, Gonzo-san," Ulysses replied. "Part of the Regulars' ongoing mission is to train young mechwarriors in the ways of combat against our enemies. What better way than to have them fight actual Davions?"

"Skirmishes only," Gonzo scoffed. "Where is your honor, old man? You should be seeking out the Davions to crush them in one glorious battle. The Davions are weak here; their Light Guards are only made up of light and medium mechs. You could roll over them easily."

"Oh yes, very good, Gonzo-san," Ulysses said, the slightest hint of scorn and rebuke entering his voice. "Of course, none of these pirate trash wandering this desert nor this GDI would dare attack us or our base camp while our backs are turned when we do battle with Davion, correct?" He paused, then added thoughtfully. "Well, the GDI almost certainly would not since their tactics appear to revolve around holding Port Krin."

"Then destroy the pirates first!" Gonzo said.

"Of course, Gonzo-san," Ulysses agreed, bowing in respect to the man. "How silly of me to not realize that the patrols I had ordered were not doing precisely that."

That was an interesting shade of puce on the ISF man's face, Ulysses thought. He wondered if he could get the man to expire of apoplexy before the day was out.

Antallos Project Studio
Earth, Sol System
January 11, 2006

"So, does this model look better now?" Cindy Mackenzie rotated the screen of her iMac to show the other woman.

Laisa Linstrom nodded approvingly. "Yes, Definitely. The superstructure is pretty much accurate to what the Dream Catcher had, though it needs more wear to be truly accurate, and it's still floating little high on the water."

"Easily fixed," Mac, as Mackenzie insisted friends call her, assured the mechanic. She glanced at the corner of the screen, where the time was. "It's 12:15, let's go for lunch. There's this Thai place down the street that I'm sure you'll love."

Laisa just shook her head at Mac's naivety. "I am still technically a POW, you know?"

"So, what, they don't let you out?"

"Let me check with my minder. He gets all huffy when I wander off without telling him." Laisa winked at her new friend, and then grabbed the cell phone -such a wonderful convenience- that she had been issued at Chloe's request.

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The Basil Leaf was a trendy eatery aimed at the young professional working in the offices nearby, and had a very café-like feel to it. Alongside, or more accurately to Laisa's way of thinking, in spite of, the excellent décor, it delivered superb food. Apparently, more than a few agreed with that assessment; there was a fair crowd of people, mostly wearing business casual. Laisa, Mac and Joe, who were wearing a dusty grey jumpsuit, a tie-die shirt and blue jeans, and a military uniform, respectively, stood out like sore thumbs. It made Laisa feel like the wharf rube all over again, something she hadn't dealt with after her first few months of life in Port Krin proper. You

learned to be streetwise fast in Port Krin, or you didn't live long enough to learn anything else. The food was really too good to sully the mood with thoughts of home, bitter home, so She banished thoughts of Antallos and engaged the newly promoted Lieutenant Chalmers, now in the GDI rather than the National Guard, in a discussion about citizenship, and the possibility of her gaining it.

The pair at the next table over, who were none too subtly listening in, muttered disparaging remarks about immigrants and their hygiene and education (or lack thereof). Laisa resolved to ignore them. She'd heard far worse. Joe, less reserved, glared at them, making them return to at least a pretense of carrying on their own conversation. Mac however seemed to take the commentary rather personally, and dragged the conversation into a discussion about how immigration was invariably of net benefit to a country and how the United States of America had been built up to greatness by the sweat of hardworking immigrants. This was an equally unsubtle way of turning their neighbor's words back against them, and made Laisa involuntarily tense, a habit born of having to get out of the way of more than one gunfight started over an exchange of insults. She decided to steer the talk away from the confrontational tone it had taken.

"So, when do you think that this GDI will take the offensive?"

"No clue," said Joe, a bit too quickly. Laisa forgave him the lie; he had probably been instructed not to tell the civilians.

"Are we going to be sending soldiers out across dozens of light years already? I thought we'd be working on our own defenses first." Mac's tone was questioning rather than critical, fortunately. Laisa didn't want her to start arguing with Joe as well.

"There are already nukes in orbit for defense, which is probably more than can be said for most of the worlds out there. And with all our intra planetary conflict we probably have as much military hardware as any five other systems combined," Joe explained. "We're not in any real danger of being conquered. In fact, that's kind of the point of heading out to Antallos. Someone out there knows where we are, and we'd prefer he not give the information to any more pirates."

"And we all know how persuasive guns are," Mac quipped.

At the next table, the woman was now loudly expounding on the evils of imperialism. The man chimed in with exhortations about the importance of preserving indigenous cultures. Laisa found herself involuntarily staring at the two in disbelief. "Do people really think that way?"

Laisa didn't realize she had spoken out loud until Joe replied, "Yes, sadly enough, they do."

"Hey now, preserving traditional cultures is a good thing," Mac objected.

"For things like Hula dancing and sand painting, sure," Joe conceded amiably. "But as Charles Napier said, 'You say that it is your custom to burn widows. Very well. We also have a custom: when men burn a woman alive, we tie a rope around their necks and hang them.' You get the idea."

"But you wouldn't want to fight in a foreign country because Shell Oil has interest there and they're getting the government to protect them, would you?" Mac asked. "We have propped up corrupt regimes, that much is a fact. And it's wrong."

"Yes, it's horrible," Laisa cut in, "But the fact is that if you have something and someone else doesn't, sooner or later he's going to get the idea of taking yours rather than making or finding his own. For that matter, he may decide that it's your fault he doesn't have it and shoot you on that principle. Humans are just like that. Even if some people don't steal, others will, and the first set has to resort to violence anyway, do defend themselves. Here in this 'America' of yours, you've built up a pretty good system of justice and arbitration. But without that system, and the guns to back it up, you're back to 'the strong taking from the weak.'" Laisa stopped abruptly, realizing that the couple they had been exchanging barbs with were now glaring daggers at her. She suddenly missed having a weapon.

"Savage practices in barbaric tribes, no doubt," the man was saying,

"Any civilized culture has non-violent means of arbitration and enforcement."

"Doesn't help when the 'culture'" -one could practically hear the quotation marks in Joe's speech- "next door come calling with guns and say to hand over the livestock." Well, that clinched it, the conflict was out in the open now that Joe was addressing the annoying commentators directly.

"Just the kind of justification one would expect from minions of the military industrial complex," the woman sneered. She and her companion stood and left.

Laisa let herself relax. Sometimes it was hard to remember that she wasn't in Port Krin, and the people here typically didn't start gunfights over insults exchanged at the bar. People here was just so **different**. It was a sudden moment of clarity for her. "So that's why Chloe is highlighting all the woes of my life. People here really don't know what goes on when they don't have the police and the army to protect them."

"Pretty much," Joe confirmed. "I thought you knew."

"I didn't get it either, Joe" Laisa told him. "I was wishing for a weapon, and worrying about a fight. On Antallos, an argument like that ends in gunfire, often as not."

"Wow." Mac shook her head. "I've never even left the state and I have culture shock already, just from listening to you."

"Good," Laisa said. "That's the first step in adapting to the new reality."

"I'm not sure I want to adapt. The new reality is rather gory." Mac made a face.

"Well if you plan on ignoring the larger universe, please don't register to vote," Joe requested. "Or make plans to travel off world. Those two dolts probably wouldn't have lasted a day living where Laisa did."

Laisa snorted. "Four hours, tops."

Earth Orbit Above Africa
Earth, Sol
9 August 2006

Aside from the light whirring noise of the life support system, the also light static of the radio was the only thing he heard as he glanced at the full blue white and brown sphere hanging in space in front of him. The golden visor hid his face for the moment, but beneath it he smiled as he glanced at his homeworld.

"Could you please concentrate on work, Marvin?" a heavily Russian accented voice asked, breaking the moment.

Captain Marvin Wilbur blinked a few times before chuckling a little nervously.

"Sorry, Alex," he noted and turned back to the large construction of struts and cables they were hanging on.

"No need to say sorry," Alexander Michailov noted and chuckled. "I have done same a few times."

Marvin nodded, unseen by the Russian. Through it was not very strange for Americans and Russians to work together in space, they had done so for years during the Mir and ISS missions, it was strange to see him hover in space, handling a large wrench, while being dressed in a Russian space suit, while he did the same, only dressed in a NASA space suit.

"Heads up, boys," a female voice could be heard over the radio. "The *JFuller* will come up in a few minutes."

"What, again?" was Marvin response.

"Hey, GDI wants this done ASAP."

"Beth, you know that we need more people for that."

"I'm not doing the planning."

Marvin and Alexander looked each other into the golden visors, before shaking their heads. It was hard to work up here eight hours a day to get Freedom Station up and online. The work was going on for three month now, and it was more improvised than anything else.

Hell the massive framework of Freedom Station was currently being build by using steel I-Beams that had been bought from just about every large steel company.

"But as far as I know we are finally getting those Transhabs from Bigelow."

"Finally..."

That was the funny thing about Freedom Station. The ISS was being used as base for the massive framework that would hopefully produce spaceships in the near future and the massive steel girders were connected to the rather flimsy framework of the ISS. The reactor of a mech and its heatsinks were providing the energy, while the construction crew was currently living out of a Leopard.

With the Transhab modules they would have the Leopard free for other things to do and finally some, if low gravity.

For a moment Marvin glanced over towards the large beam hanging in space at one end of the framework, the ISS in the center. Two arms stretching two hundred meters into space would spin around the axis with about six Transhabs on each end to provide gravity. He just hoped that Bigelow hadn't forgotten anything...

Only two minutes later the large sphere of the *Fuller*, a Union that had was used to transport just about anything into space, came into view.

Fuller was a normal Union, even through most of the stuff she transported was loaded into the Mech and ASF bays.

"Any idea how many people we get?"

"They said something about twenty."

"Is too little," Alexander noted and Marvin nodded as they secured the last screw to connect the two I-beams.

"Preacher to the choir," Beth noted, "But you know that we need to train them first. And don't forget that you want to have some vacation sometimes."

Port Krin
Antallos
August 8 2006/3021

"Lieutenant, we've got one last group incoming. The good news is that we've got another trump card to play, and after these there isn't a damned thing left to hit us for days. The bad news is that we need them held outside the perimeter for our ace in the hole to do any good." General Davis looked haggard, which was understandable after literally days of continuous fighting interspersed with frantic repairs and preparations. Eliminating Ryan had indeed proved to be the easy part, as it seemed that every two-bit crime syndicate and semi-retired merc on this planet had had a mech stashed somewhere, and they had all been brought out to play as the prospective pile of loot just kept increasing. The reason neither neighboring Successor State had put in the effort to conquer the place had become readily apparent, as had the limitations of their sourcebook derived intelligence.

"Sir, the only thing I've got that might do the trick is a sacrifice play with all our remaining mechs, and that is by no means guaranteed to even slow them down." In accordance with his worst fears, 1st Lieutenant Dansel had managed to outlast all fifteen of his superiors in the battalion, ending up as the last officer healthy and with a functional mech. The need to place unit commanders in the rear seat was something that would be emphasized multiple times in the after action reviews, if anyone survived to make them.

The fight against Redjack Ryan had been as close to a textbook operation as a battle in the real world ever gets. The second major battle had been a cakewalk, but had seen the expenditure of the last of the dropship mounted missile batteries. The third, against the rogue mercenary battalion Vorax had somehow gotten on planet without anyone realizing, had seen the grounding of the *Daedalus* with severe damage. At that point a coalition of city states had attacked, and the ensuing series of running firefights had seen the expenditure of all remaining Hellfire and Javelin missiles, along with

all but a few rounds of artillery. After that, it had been a series of slugging matches that slowly ground away at GDI's strength.

The sole bright spot was that the Kuritans and Davions had chosen to shadow each other deep into the Free Zones, since neither would turn their back on the other, or willingly get into a pitched battle surrounded by hostiles this far from home. The fact that the first scout lance of the Pescht regulars had been greeted by the burned and broken, but still identifiable corpse of Redjack Ryan may have had something to do with the Combine forces willingness to not press the matter. Of course, their stance might yet change if they found out that GDI had already submitted documentation of his death to the local Comstar office and put in for the outstanding bounties.

By this point, GDI's first battlemech battalion was down to a mere fifteen machines. A combination of concentration of fire on the largest targets, and an unspoken 'don't try to force the mercs into a suicidal last stand, we don't know how they'll jump' policy had resulted in most of Charlie company's machines being down checked as they took heavy damage, so that resources and technicians could be concentrated on the rest. Perversely, three of its four surviving machines were from the Angry Worms lance. Half the time, shots fired at Jankowski went wild for no apparent reason, and Brox seemed to have a preternatural talent for knowing exactly when to shift his mech slightly to avoid incoming fire. The fourth was Quasimodo, piloted by Hale, which as the smallest target in the company with only short range weaponry had simply drawn the least fire. The rest of the company was a grab bag of individual mechs and the occasional wing-pair.

"Just do your best to hold them outside the perimeter. If you can do that, we have a good chance of wiping them all out in one go."

"That's one hell of a trump card sir" An idea that was either pure genius or utter stupidity(whichever it was, it was certainly batshit insane) began to form in Dansel's head. "Sir, I think I can manage it, but I need all the spare explosives we have, our artillery commander, the largest bolts of cloth that can be found, any completely unsalvageable light mechs we've recovered, and as much loose myomer as we can find."

"Son, I'm not even going to pretend to understand all of that, but I'll get it moving your way." Shutting down the radio, the general started shouting orders to his staff.

Fifteen mechs stood waiting behind the shatter remnants of the wall. Behind them a short battalion of Merkavas took up defensive positions, interspersed with scattered salvaged tanks from previous attacks. Far behind, teams of Industrialmechs could be seen attempting to drag the *Daedalus* around so that it's broadside would hopefully bear on the incoming forces if they made it that far.

"You know, it's not too late for you idiots to find a spot on the dropships" Dandel said on the Charlie Company circuit. Finding said spot would be difficult, since the simple realization that the GDI force didn't take casually raping the female populace as their due had resulted in the ships being deluged with hopeful refugees. Even after being told that there weren't supplies to guarantee the survival of more than half those already there, still more people turned up, hoping for something, anything better than the hellish existence Port Krin offered.

"Hell with it. Everyone's gotta die someplace. At least it beats having a heart attack on one of Lewis's runs." Hale had toyed with the idea, but found he was just sick of running.

"Speak for yourself Hale, some of us are just too pretty to die." Jankowski was still young enough that death was something that could only happen to other people.

-And your momma is too pretty for me to die yet- Brox, if anything, was actively looking for someone who could manage to legitimately kill him in battle.

"You know, I'm so damned touched by all of you I may just have to file a restraining order." Switching to the battalion net, Dandel said "We initiate Fechez La Vache on my mark, then we hit them hard and fast. I realize this is the point where I'm supposed to make an

inspirational speech to stir you all against impossible odds, but the one thing we forgot on this trip was a speech writer. Just remember, after I get my dumb ass shot all to hell, if I see you slacking off, I'll come up there and take over your mech myself. Hale has tactical command, since he actually knows what the hell he's doing with a Battlemech company."

"Sir, the enemy will be centered in the projected engagement range in one minute" Specialist Griffen was Dansel's third RTO of the operation, a malfunctioning cooling suit and an inferno attack had resulted in the first being pulled with heat stroke, while the second had suffered a concussion during a fall.

Dansel switched to the general net "General, there's a message I need you to take home for me"

"What is it Lieutenant?"

"I need you to tell the president's daughter that she still scares the hell out of me. Dansel Out."

The sound of a rubber band fight between angry deities echoed across the port as the generators attached to the myomer cables were turned on. Five of the six improvised launchers functioned adequately, lofting their payload of quadriplegic mechs and scrap metal clouds over the wall. The sixth saw one of the main cables snap, spinning the mech in place even as it missed the throat of the fire direction officer by inches, and ripped the rifle from one infantryman's hands with enough force to dislocate his right wrist and break all the fingers on that hand. Everyone in the area frantically ran for cover, as the truncated Stinger slowly wobbled to a halt.

Past the wall, the attacking forces found their radar screens effectively shut down by a veritable wall of chaff descending towards them. One fast thinking Jagermech pilot rapidly shifted to his MAD detector, picking out the active fusion reactors hidden in the cloud. With commendable skill, he managed to nail a descending

Commando, tearing it apart. Unfortunately, this was very nearly the worst thing he could possibly have done, as the improvised artillery shell was transformed into an improvised cluster bomb, raining explosives across a wide area.

The other four projectiles detonated, two upon receiving the radio signal, one on the direction of the detonator linked to an altimeter, and the fourth by the last ditch impact fuse as it directly collided with an unlucky Firestarter. Each mech had had their internal cavities stuffed with explosives, and the majority of the shielding on the reactors removed, resulting in a massive outward burst of shrapnel, and a silver globe of fire that consumed anything unfortunate enough to be in immediate proximity to, or in the case of the Firestarter actually in contact with the ballistic kamikaze.

As the assault force was reeling under the completely unexpected attack, GDI's first mech battalion came over the wall, with capes improbably streaming from their shoulders, and smashed straight through the sacrificial scout group without slowing. Jankowski, finding himself at the perfect height, simply kicked in the chest of a Wasp. Brox trampled a Pegasus hovertank underfoot as he brought his weapons to bear on the next line of enemies. And Dansel, as the only one insane enough to consider the idea, lobbed the ammunition crate he was carrying into the chest of a Phoenix Hawk, speared it with his flamer to ensure detonation, then casually ripped the notoriously poorly armored head off the falling machine as he passed a few moments later.

Falling into a line, the GDI mechs fired everything they had at the lance leading the city-state vanguard, sending two mechs crashing to the ground and punching through to the ammo to obliterate a third. By then, their enemies had recovered from the initial shock and began firing back en-masse. While they were nowhere near as coordinated as the GDI forces, they still had nearly twice as many mechs. Shots began to land on hastily and inadequately repaired armor, and Warrant Officer Miller's mech was the first to fall as a laser barrage removed his mech's right leg at the knee. Levering himself on his left arm he continued to lay down supporting fire with his PPC, as a previously undetected fault in the heat sinks of Master Sergeant Graham's Rifleman made itself know when his remaining

autocannon ammunition started to cook off. Perversely, with only two volleys left in the magazine the force was insufficient to destroy his machine, but the automatic ejection sequence noted an ammunition explosion and triggered anyway. Sergeant First Class Kondo of the JSDF, one leg dragging from a pair of SRM hits that had smashed his actuators started using the still standing mech as impromptu cover for pop-up attacks, until return fire sent it crashing to the ground, and he continued, missiles expended, to hobble forward, medium lasers continuously firing.

The battle degenerated into an indiscriminate brawl as the remaining twelve charging mechs crashed into their enemy's line. Feldwebel Von Braun, both arms missing from his Phoenix Hawk, and reactor shielding critically damaged smashed into a damaged Enforcer at full speed, sending both mechs crumpling to the ground. The remainder of its lance attempted to jump behind the trio of Battlemasters rampaging at the head of the group only to have Hale shatter the torso of a Jenner with a well placed autocannon volley, Dansel snatch a girder blasted an incredible distance from the Wall off the ground and smash an Assassin out of mid-air then spearing it with his lasers as it fell, and Brox step backwards with lazy effortless grace to catch the remaining Vulcan with a full alpha strike, as Jankowski managed to spin in place to hit the mech with both front and rear weapons in the space of four seconds before ending his spin still facing the majority of the enemy.

The company of mercenaries who had until now been keeping to the rear of the attacking force made their presence known with a volley that turned two GDI mechs into scrap metal. In return, Jankowski and Brox turned a Centurion into a funeral pyre, as the remaining seven mechs behind them forcibly dismembered an Orion. Tracking a series of shots up into the head of a Thunderbolt, Dansel turned his Battlemaster towards the next target, only to catch an autocannon burst to the head from a Hunchback.

The cloud of explosions and flying metal did nothing to obscure the sight of a legless body being flung from the mech.

The Battlemaster at the head of the GDI forces staggered backwards, its head incredibly deformed but still present. Seemingly impossibly,

it righted itself, lashing out at the Hunchback, instantly turning 30 feet of war machine into a scorch mark on the ground as the reactor overloaded. A shout of "Come on then!" echoed from the remaining loudspeakers as the GDI forces resumed their charge with renewed vigor.

Lieutenant Dansel, half his computers down and feeling the draft from the gaping hole at the rear of his mech's head charged forward, exchanging volleys with an enemy Battlemaster, finally sending it crashing down to the ground as he reached point blank range. Without conscious thought, he brought the girder down through the other mech's faceplate, even as he rocked backwards under fire from an enemy Panther that his Lancemates ruthlessly put down a moment later. As the combatants paused for a second, he activated his speakers again, bellowing "Who wants to be Next?" even as he tried to get the mech's controls to respond.

The moment stretched on as the seven remaining GDI mechs stood facing their twelve enemies. Dansel sighed and activated the radio to the rest of his unit "Gyro's gone, the only thing holding me up is the damned girder. Get everyone you can back behind the wall, I'll try to get them to focus on me for a moment to give you a chance"

Hale's voice responded on the net "Right, you heard Hulk before his radio went out, his Gyro's gone so we'll need to keep them off him."

"Dammit Hale get them the hell back! The next wave will be in range in a few minutes, that's all these bozos are waiting for!"

"Man, it's a good thing he gave me tactical command before losing radio from that head hit, otherwise we might do something crazy like try to abandon him."

"Fine. If you mutinous bastards could get one of them to step in front of my guns, I promise to let you live for the court martial."

"Sir, your radio's working again, that's fantastic! Recommend we hit the lighter mechs first, we can take down more of them and they're the ones that will give the tankers the most trouble."

GDS dropship *Yautja*
Mid-air near Port Krin
Antallos
August 8 2006/3021

"Coming up on drop position now Captain" Lieutenant Synx, the Bombardier reported. When the initial mission concept had been conceived, it had become apparent that the needs of the mission would barely make an impact on the available lift capacity for the dropship. The idea of including additional reloads for the ground forces had been floated, but was deemed to likely to compromise the dropship's identity and cause the covert nature of their mission to unravel. However, the idea of a bomb being dropped from over a hundred kilometers away was so ridiculously outside the frame of reference of the Inner Sphere meant that it was at least possible for the *Yautja* to covertly perform a bombing run in support of the ground forces without giving away the game.

The presence of Ryan's dropships, the assorted City state forces, the Kuritans, and the Davions had massively complicated the situation. Until the last stages of the battle, the situation hadn't been desperate enough to commit their second to last hole card(no one really wanted to consider the implications of employing their final option), and there had been too many players on the field to realistically get away with it undetected. However, at this moment, there was only one remaining actively hostile force in the field, and the Pesht Regulars and Davion Guards had maneuvered each other well away from the current battle zone, in addition to having had to pull in their observers closer to the main body due to trigger happy city state forces and mercs.

Still, setting up the run had taken time, time that the ground forces didn't have. Even as the dropship leveled out in preparation to begin bombing, GDI's remaining mechs were preparing to go over the top.

"Start launch, and expedite. Maybe if we can hit them fast enough they won't have a chance to do anything to their prisoners." The captain was a born pessimist, and that statement was actually the

most cheerful thing the crew had heard from his mouth all day.

The Dropship began to shudder and jerk as ordnance was ejected. Entirely too soon the shuddering stopped, as red lights appeared on Synx's board. "Sir, we have a severe failure on the launch rack, it's jammed and unable to continue, or even jettison. The first wave is on the way, but we only dropped a single bomb from the second grouping, and its not responding to commands."

"Get it cleared as soon as possible. Nav, bring us down to low altitude and prepare to support from in close as soon as the problem is fixed."

"We should jump them now. We've got five more mechs than them, and they're shot to hell. We can take em." Lieutenant Burdoch was always an over-eager little shit, but Captain Vranck wondered how the *hell* he could be this clueless when they'd already lost nearly two-thirds of their forces.

"We could do that, or if we like living, we could wait for the second column to get here so we don't lose more people than we have to. Just keep your weapons dialed in and be prepared to hit them if they make a move." Switching channels, she contacted the other group 'Sir tell me you're going to be here in the vicinity of now. I don't know how long I can keep Burdoch from trying to get us pointlessly killed"

"Two minutes Captain, we'll be hitting them in- frak! where the hell's it coming from?! Evade, all units eva-!" The signal was cut off with grim finality, as a series of explosions erupted on the horizon in the direction their reinforcements were approaching from. A moment later, a single bomb landed between the two groups, startling Burdoch into discharging his weapons at an innocent piece of already cratered ground, stopping as he realized that six of the enemy had turned slightly so their weapons bore on him.

"Oh shit I pissed my- aw crap, the channel was open. Uh, recommendations ma'am?"

"Right, listen carefully, and I think we can all make it through this. What I want you to do is-"

"Well damn", Dansel said to himself as he received the update. Turning on his radio, he said "Well, the good news is that the reinforcements are gone, the bad news is the bomber's broke. I figure we've got maybe three minutes before they nerve up enough to hit us, so pick your targets, and don't be ashamed to use me as a shield. Last one in Valhalla buys the beer, and- Oh Come on!" he shouted in disbelief, as the enemy mechs began to power down and the pilots stated to emerge.

Hale broke the stunned silence, choking out between whoops of laughter "Don't worry sir. We'll make sure to keep you between us and their incredibly deadly attempt to surrender."

Jankowskci, unable to stop himself from giggling, added "Some hero, he can't even lay down his life in a hopeless last stand and get it right."

As the wheezing gasps that served Brox as laughter joined in with the whole unit cracking up, his text display lit up "You can always just shoot yourself and end the pain. I'll tell your mom you went out like a hero."

"Screw You All. I'm going to try to keep this thing upright long enough for you to secure all of them, make sure they're all locked down then send a team to get me in the bay so they can get my damned Gyro back online. And see if you can find what's left of my damned RTO."

GDS Dropship *Commodore Perry*
Port Krin
Antallos
8 August 2006/3021

"Well, thank God," General Davis breathed in relief after Lieutenant Dansel's report came in. Not that he needed the report; he had pretty much watched the entire last stand as it happened. But there was still work to do. "Colonel Kurita."

"Yes, sir?"

"Start assembling a status report for the Brigade," Davis said grimly. Low on fuel, low on ammunition, and low on equipment, the Brigade was all but spent. Now he had to see what there was left... and what was lost. "Secure the city perimeter and start getting our people rested up as best we can. We may or may not have another fight on our hands and I want to be in the best condition possible if we have to make another go at it."

"Yes, sir."

Davis' eyes flicked over to the map display. The icons showing the Davion and Kuritan units were well away from Port Krin still playing tag with each other. The Brigade still held Port Krin, but either of those forces alone could probably roll over what was left of the Brigade if it came to a fight.

But maybe it didn't have to.

"Captain Kirov," Davis called.

"Yes, sir?"

"Contact our friends out there," Davis said, pointing at the Davion and Kuritan icons on the map. "Schedule a conference call with their commanders at their earliest convenience, but no earlier than an hour from now."

"Sir?" Kirov said, confused.

"I haven't had a shower in two days, Captain," Davis replied ironically with a humorless, lopsided smile. "I can't be less than my best when I talk to them now, can I?"

Headquarters Tent
Davion Light Guards Base Camp
Sea of Despair
Antallos

"Sir, tell me you're going to be here in the vicinity of now. I don't know how long I can keep Burdoch from trying to get us pointlessly killed."

"Two minutes Captain, we'll be hitting them in- frak! Where the hell's it coming from?! Evade, all units eva-!"

"That's it, sir," Major Davion said regretfully as the recording ended. "After that, we picked up civilian transmissions saying that the GDI had won. No details though."

"What about the GDI?" Marshal Riffenberg asked. "Have we been able to eavesdrop on what they're saying yet?"

"No, sir," Davion replied. "Our communication techs haven't even been able to isolate what frequencies they might be using. Every time they think they have something, it just vanishes."

"That can't be right," Riffenberg muttered to himself. It wouldn't have surprised Riffenberg that this GDI would have encrypted their own radio transmissions, but making their transmissions undetectable? It sounded like magic. "How do they do that?"

"I don't know, sir," Major Davion admitted.

"Of course not," Riffenberg growled. "So what do we know?"

Headquarters Tent
6th Pesht Regulars Base Camp
Sea of Despair

Antallos

"Our data is... limited," Tai-i Morrison said slowly. "Our reconnaissance assets have been whittled away by the City-State pirates and we have been conserving them to watch our Davion foes."

"So what do we know?" Tai-sa Ulysses Kurita asked pointedly.

"Seismic sensors picked up vibrations consistent with large explosions," Morrison continued. He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "That is all the direct observational data we have. Given our distance from Port Krin, our people have speculated that the GDI must have planted mines or used artillery of unprecedented power. The pirate's last transmissions seem to indicate artillery, which fits with what we have seen of the GDI's tactics."

"Nonsense!" Harmon Gonzo scoffed. "The GDI had no artillery ammunition left. We saw the slackening in their fire!"

"It would seem, Gonzo-san, that we did not see what we thought we saw," Ulysses said mildly, but the rebuke in his voice was evident to all. "It would seem they were harboring some surprises in reserve."

"Then let us go to Port Krin and take what secrets this GDI has!" Gonzo cried.

"Ah, very good, Gonzo-san," Ulysses agreed. "Let us go challenge a force that thinks nothing of destroying... what was the size of that last pirate unit, Tai-i Morrison?"

"About a company of mechs," Morrison answered promptly. "Possibly with infantry and vehicle support."

"Yes, yes," Ulysses said, nodding thanks. "Let us go challenge this GDI who we have no argument with, who thinks nothing of destroying battalions of mechs in company sized lots, and who may possibly have more such weapons in reserve."

"They can't have any more such weapons in reserve!" Gonzo said, but the sweat beading his forehead and the shifting of his eyes gave the

lie to his words.

"Perhaps," Ulysses said thoughtfully. "Nevertheless, they extended us the courtesy to watch the destruction of the scum who dared attack the Combine. They've fought a three day campaign against near impossible odds in one of the most glorious displays of skill and courage I have ever seen... outside a Combine unit of course. I am willing to venture that the Dragon could use an honored ally to guard our flank."

"The Dragon needs no friends," Gonzo declared.

Before Ulysses could reply to the ISF man, a tech handed Morrison a note.

"Pardon, Tai-sa, Gonzo-san," Morrison said. "We have a received a message from the GDI commander. He wishes to arrange a meeting."

GDS Dropship *Commodore Perry*
Port Krin
Antallos

Weird, Davis thought. He had been in teleconferences before back on Earth. But those had been with solid, crystal clear – or sometimes not so clear depending on network conditions – flat screen monitors. Here lightyears from home, the images of the other men's heads were three dimensional and ghostly transparent.

To Davis' left was the Davion CO. The man was a fit, late middle aged man with graying hair who wouldn't have been out of place in any senior officers meeting back home. In contrast, the Kuritan CO on Davis' right was a wrinkled ancient who wouldn't have been out of place as the mentor figure or wizard of some Eastern martial arts movie.

"Hello, gentlemen. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to talk to me." Davis said. "Allow me to introduce myself; I am Brigadier General Don Davis of the Global Defense Initiative."

"Marshall Jonathan Riffenberg, AFFS," the Davion commander replied

gruffly.

"I am Tai-sa Ulysses Kurita," the Kuritan commander said formally with a slight bow of his head. "Allow me to congratulate you on a battle well fought, General."

"Yes, that was... an interesting style of combat you have there," Riffenberg said. "I'd like to hear how you managed to accomplish everything you did."

"I'm sure you would, Marshall," Davis replied. "Maybe I'll even tell you some day. But I'm afraid that will have to wait. The reason I called was to ascertain your intentions are regarding my people and the people of Port Krin."

"I'm not sure what you mean, General," Riffenberg replied. "Quite honestly, I don't even know who you people are."

"Indeed," Kurita agreed, "I must admit that you have piqued the curiosity of my staff."

"Let's be honest here, gentlemen," Davis said, suddenly feeling very tired. "Last year, Port Krin's former Administrator gathered together a little army to take a little nowhere world he called, 'Motherload'. Unfortunately for him, he didn't send a big enough force by about... oh, an order of magnitude or two. My people and I are here to make sure no one else tries to invade my home again." He steepled his fingers together. "So the real question is, what are your people's intentions toward my home?"

"You will understand that I cannot speak for the Coordinator on this matter, General," Tai-sa Kurita asked. "As for myself, I was sent here to hunt pirates, which I have done. I was ordered to see to the death of the pirate Redjack Ryan, which I have also done. As far as I am concerned, my mission here is complete."

Davis turned to look at Riffenberg.

"Hey, my people are just tourists here," Riffenberg said nonchalantly. "You know, see the sights, take some holos, shoot some game..."

"Alas, but I feel that I cannot leave while the soldiers of Hanse Davion remain on this world," Ulysses said. "Why, they might use it as a base to stage raids into the Combine."

"Well, I can't really leave while there's still 'game' to be shot," Riffenberg snapped back.

"Gentlemen, please," Davis said, interrupting the burgeoning argument. "While I'd be more than happy to let you two go back to shooting each other, I'm also sure that neither of you wants to waste valuable soldiers and machines on pointless battles with nothing to show for it."

The two holographic heads glared at each other, suggesting that they really did want that.

"You have a suggestion, General?" Kurita asked.

"Well, the GDI is taking over the administration of Port Krin, maybe even all of Antallos," Davis told him. "My orders also expressly included avoiding conflict with your nations if at all possible. Now, I imagine that neither of you wants to see the GDI allied with your enemy, correct?"

"Of course, General."

"Yeah, not a chance in hell that we'd let that happen."

"Then we're all in happy agreement," Davis said. "The GDI will declare Port Krin to be a neutral port. Both of you can go home and report mission accomplished. You can also report that Port Krin is now a pirate free zone, and it'll stay that way if the GDI has anything to say about it. By now, we must have accounted for more than ninety percent of the pirates on this side of the Inner Sphere. And to top it all off, my world will be running trade through Port Krin; you might find some of the products worth buying. Now admittedly, we're a military not trade expedition, but I think we can find a few samples that might catch your people's interests."

"Very tempting, General," Kurita said slowly. "I will consider your offer."

"Yes, very nice, but just one thing," Riffenberg agreed neutrally. "Where the hell are you people from anyway? It's pretty obvious that 'Motherload' isn't what you named your planet."

"Oh, that's simple, Marshall," Davis said. "We're from Earth."

Silence reined as the other two leaders digested his words.

"Which Earth?" Riffenberg asked, confused.

"There are at least two that come to mind," Kurita mused aloud. "But it seems unlikely that you are from either one. A third Earth as it were?"

"Which Earth?" Riffenberg said more forcefully.

"Ah, that would be telling," Davis answered.

Comstar Explorer Corps - *Von Braun*, Magellan Class Jumpship
August 30th 2006/3021
Columbus System Nadir

Precenter Gabriel Ormus frowned the frown of a man with deep concerns. While most Explorer Corps personnel could count on never encountering another ship on mission, it did happen on occasion. And Gabriel had the sneaking suspicion that his crew was probably out of practice faking their origin. They were professional, sure, but there were a lot of little things that one tended not to notice, and now of all times, Gabriel needed to be sure.

The other ship was unfamiliar- just as the Von Braun could be a ship from any port of call in the Sphere, so too could this other ship they'd detected when they arrived- its solar sail displayed prominently. Sensor resolution at this distance was low, but they were definitely underarmed for a ship of their size, which was comforting. But there was the question of what they were doing this far out. There were no independents in this area, and this system was several jumps from any port of call.

"Unless there's something out here we don't know of," he said openly, musing. "Have they hailed us?"

"No sir- though they did ping us with their radar when we jumped in. We've also spotted a dropship- Mule class, making its way back from the fourth planet," answered Kohn Raoul, the ship's communication officer. Tasked with everything from mere communications chatter, to radar and tracking, Kohn was a wary sort. "If the world's habitable, they might just be stopping to replenish their supplies."

"I suppose it's possible. I guess we can't get away with just ignoring them- Send them a hail. We'll invite them for dinner, maybe we can learn a bit about their mission."

"Acknowledged sir, sending now-" and then he paused as an alarm screamed a proximity alert. That was the last thing Kohn and Gabriel heard before the alarm, and the rest of the ship, went silent. "By Terra, what happened?"

"Someone jumped in, nearly on top of us. Sensors were knocked out by that EMP before we could get a look at them, but judging by the strength of the dislocation, they must have been pretty big."

"So not the other ship then. Though we can't rule out the possibility- while you see about rebooting the computers, I'm going to..."

And then he was abruptly silent, listening.

"Do you hear that?" he asked quietly, straining his ears. Kohn did not reply, but soon enough they heard the sound again. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

Some sort of impact against the hull. No explosions, no shaking, so whatever it was wasn't explosive. Gabriel's inner ear detected no change in pressure so whatever it was hadn't breached the hull. Which suggested one, nearly incredulous answer.

Precentor Gabriel Ormus drew his sidearm and made for the door. And before he ducked out into the hall he spoke one word, as much a curse as it was descriptive.

"Boarders!"

GDI - *Lady Vittoria*, Scout Class Jumpship

August 30th 2006/3021

Columbus System Nadir

"Lucky!" exulted engine technician Tendo. Of Japanese origin, the man spoke only fragmented english, and the occasional translation book phrase, such as 'where is the bathroom' and 'I'm going to stick a chicken up your ass' but was otherwise one of the best jump techs GDI had their hands on. He had been assigned to this mission because of his test scores, which showed that eight out of ten times he was able to improve the accuracy of calculations for insystem jumps.

"Go," ordered Captain Sanford, once reversion to realspace was complete. Above the holo-tank hung a representation of the Von

Braun, having been shaken rather heavily by the sheer proximity of their jump dislocation. Even as he gave his order, several cables launched from the Vittoria, striking across the void and imbedding themselves in the hull of the Von Braun. Unrestrained electrical current leapt, and the Von Braun twisted and bucked as its systems burnt out. And even as the rocket powered contraption built into the Vittoria's shuttlebay crossed the gap of space between the two jumpships, the sensor team of ship had the chance to observe a curious but logical event.

There, across the void of space sat their own ship- the light reaching them was only a few minutes old; they were staring into their past. They watched as the Mule docked, as the jump sail hastily closed, and as the ship vanished in a flash of radiation.

It was curious and very unsettling all at once.

Comstar Explorer Corps - *Von Braun* Cargo Hold

Adept VII Noon was currently in trouble. Sizable trouble. Cowering behind a shipping crate, he cradled his sidearm in shaking hands, watching as the dark suited individuals made their way through a breach in the hull. They were all suited in some sort of light combat armour- with helmets that obscured their faces, and weaponry of an unknown make. Two novices had been shifting cargo when they had arrived, and been told to stand down by the invaders in what sounded like grating english.

They had been killed when they failed to comply fast enough, the muzzled bark of those rifles blowing their bodies apart.

Now they were surveying the area and setting up some sort of perimeter. Noon had served in the military once, before being recruited for the Explorer Corps. These men, whoever they were, acted far more professional then most military operatives he had seen. They were well equipped and careful, and made no fun out of their job. These were men on a mission.

Noon, for all his years of loyalty frowned. He had no hope against men like these, and the little needler in his hand would be unlikely to penetrate what armour they wore. So he made the only real decision open to him. He surre-

"Good call," said a voice in heavily accented English. Noon looked up and saw the barrel of one of those rifles pointed straight at him. Two operatives hung 'above' him, bracing themselves with one hand against a support beam.

"I... I surrender," he said haltingly, letting go of his sidearm and raising his hands. One of the operatives kicked his needler away, and pushed down, landing before him. Within moments Noon's hands were tied together by some sort of plastic cord, and he was being escorted through the hole in the hull.

On the other side what he found was curious- and disturbing. More personnel from the Von Braun, similarly tied up were sitting in a corner of what appeared to be some sort of shuttle. As he made his way over to them, he noted several unmasked figures in another corner- of varying ancestry. After a moment he realized they were tending to wounds, and several held what appeared to be metal chains. A memory stirred, and he recalled. Identification tags of the dead.

"I see they caught you with your pants down, Noon," muttered one of the captives- and Noon sought and caught the eyes of... "Precentor?"

"We tried to prevent them from getting to the bridge- but whoever they are, they're better armed and armoured than we were. I've also discovered- as some of the men here can attest, that our combat training exercises were significantly lacking- microgravity combat is not what I expected, and these men apparently have been heavily trained for it," he explained. It took Noon a moment, but then he realized that the purple covering the Precentor was wearing wasn't a garment- *it was his face!* "Yes, they beat me pretty soundly- but I had to try and make a break for it. Of course, now I'm bolted to the wall."

"What about the... *garrison*," Noon asked quietly. Gabriel let loose a grim bark of laughter.

"Still holed up in the drive section of the ship. Our custodians managed to shut off the autodestruct before they could engage it, but they know their way around the ship like no others after all those combat drills. If we have any hope it's sure to be them."

Noon frowned, then perked up as he heard gunfire in the distance. The floor rumbled with the sound of some sort of explosion, before it quieted again.

Thunk.

"What the?" Noon wondered- more boarders?

Thunk.

"You're about to see how crazy our custodians are," interjected Gabriel, reading the young man's confusion.

Thunk. Hiss.

Adept Noon looked up, and spotted the heavily armoured form at the gate. A veritable tank of a man, he was clad in something reminiscent of ancient diving bells, but clearly outfitted for space combat.

::I managed to eliminate four of their number. Eight still remain:: it declared in a monotone. It took the captives a moment to realize that the strange echoing voice wasn't coming from the armoured figure, but from the radios carried by the other personnel.

::Aye. Yes, I'm just rearming- I think they're going to try and manually activate the destruct sequence. I'll try halt them when they make that attempt:: it continued. Gabriel strained for a moment, and could hear a second voice on the radios, speaking to it softly.

::For Queen and Country:: it said a final time, exchanging its armament and turning. ::I'll do my duty::

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

The sounds of gunfire again, another explosion, and then the curious feeling of a pressure shift. Almost immediately their captors reacted, hitting a mechanism that sealed the entry way they'd used to board this section of the Von Braun.

"Everyone okay?" asked one of their custodians, a young woman. She turned and looked at the captives with an odd expression. "That means you too."

"We're as fine as we can be, for having our livelihoods stolen out from beneath us, miss," the Precentor began. It was the first time he had spoken more than curses to these people, but it really was the only option available to him.

"Don't you worry Precentor- We'll have this over soon. Besides, so long as you cooperate, there won't be any trouble. We *do* have standards, after all," she said evenly. "A gilded prison is better than death, right? And think of it, you'll be doing your duty- helping explore the periphery and bring that knowledge home."

"But to what home? Yours?" he muttered.

"Something along those lines. But then, I think after this long length of time in space you'd enjoy returning to Earth."

"Earth... Terra!? What's happened to Terra!?" he asked, suddenly animate despite his injuries. There was a furious gleam in his eyes, and already he was preparing for another fight.

"Nothing," the woman interjected. "But don't worry, you'll soon learn everything you could ever want to know. Now quiet, Infrared is showing a detachment from the remains of your Garrison- if you want to make it out of here alive, you'd best be silent. They had orders to kill anyone we captured alive- that's why the cooks didn't

make it out of the mess hall."

"Orders to... what?" he gasped. "Surely you can't be-"

The sound of her rifle butt impacting his face was low and heavy, and he collapsed as much as someone could in microgravity.

"I'm always serious," she answered, drawing up her weapon. Through the sensor equipment mounted on the 'gate' the operative was fed imagery showing a pair of men, sans transponders, sneaking towards it. They were understandably surprised when the autoguns unfolded from their mounts and reduced them to a consistency of paste.

GDI - Lady Vittoria, Scout Class Jumpship
August 31st 2006/3021
Columbus System Nadir

It was done. The Von Braun was secure and intact- *mostly*. Her crew was in custody- save for their military garrison, who had all died. Lastly, but not least, both ships had averted what could have been a sizable catastrophe. The last surviving garrison operative had attempted to initiate a jump in order to destroy them both. Fortunately, between Technician Tendo doing *something* with *Lady Vittoria's* jump drive, and fast work on behalf of the boarding party, that catastrophe had been averted.

But only just.

Captain Sanford pinched the bridge of his nose as a headache set on. With the surviving crew of the Von Braun in custody, the hard part of his mission was over. But there were still repairs to be done- *Lady Vittoria* had sustained substantial damage during the barely averted jump crisis. While there was a Star League era jumpship dock nearby, neither of their jumpships were built to move themselves beyond the meager distance their stationkeeping drives could take them. The crew were thus currently attempting to rig up some sort of harness to allow for the two dropships in their possession to 'tow' the jumpships

insystem. But it was slow going.

"Huh," muttered Tendo, interrupting Sanford's reverie. He looked at his screens oddly, then jabbered something in japanese into his comms. He frowned and jabbered another batch of words. "Huh."

"You've found something?" Sanford asked. Tendo was rated as bilingual- he knew english. But for whatever reason Sanford had never heard him speak it.

"Hai," he replied slowly. Manipulating his controls, a point appeared in the air over the holotank. Lines branched out, and soon Sanford was looking at an image that showed the location of the *Lady Vittoria* and *Von Braun*, a calculated orbital path, and some other data Sanford wasn't familiar with. "Jump Fructuations."

It was english, but barely.

The diagram expanded, and showed an orbital course to the lunar dockyards- they had mapped the moon when the expedition had first arrived at the system, but hadn't had a chance to go through its spoils.

"Big Fructuations," Tendo elaborated. "Capitar Crass. We shourd inbestivate."

He then returned to jabbering in japanese to his compatriot on the *Von Braun*. Sanford mused for a moment, then decided it was worth a shot. He turned to Carol, the communications tech who had been patently ignoring Tendo's halting engrish.

"Get Walker on the line, tell him to start getting ready to head back to Columbus IV-B," he ordered, turning back to Tendo, who was going over some data rather furiously. "Tendo, I need you on that mission. If they find a jumpship, then I need someone experienced enough to try and get it working."

"OKAY BOSSUH," Tendo enunciated clearly- though not clearly enough. He stood, and it was then that Sanford noticed all the *pockets* Tendou wore. Each one bulging with eletrical components.

He then took Sanford's hand and shook vigorously, before turning and heading off the bridge. Sanford stared after him for a moment, then pinched the bridge of his nose again. He suspected he would never get used to that man.

Port Krin
Antallos
August 8th 3021

Captain (he still had to get accustomed to the new rank) Johnson watched his men. They had dug in at the northern edge of Port Krin. The defensive wall over here had been subject to time, nature and the attack from GDI just days prior to a degree where it had almost completely vanished, so now his company, reinforced by two ad hoc platoons of GDI regulars, had hastily dug foxholes and simple trenches in preparation for the coming attack. A mechanized infantry battalion had circled around the city during the night, hoping to outflank the defenders. They were prepared. That was the good news.

The bad news was that his little command was the only thing Brigade could spare. Low chance of artillery support, no mortars, no reinforcements, nothing. Everything else that was still working was already engaged against the main attack from the south, the weapons fire audible in the distance.

It wouldn't take long now, the attackers were perhaps 5 minutes away.

His radioman interrupted Johnson's thoughts: "Sir, I just had the Major in the line. He said that they can't spare anything right now, but he has been given permission to send one or two Mechs over here once they finished repairs. He estimates 30 minutes."

The Major, of course, referred to Major Staedele. Everyone from the Burons had that habit now, calling Major Thomas, the CO of the infantry battalion always with his name.

"Good. That leaves us to go up against roughly 2:1 odds for half an hour. Should be doable. Now if we just had some Javelins..."

Much to the surprise of everyone involved, GDI's infantry had used up their ATGMs at a rate nobody had even come close to expect. They had ran out on Day 2.

Johnson chastised himself. No use crying over spilt milk. He eyed his defences a last time, pleased about just how well they had managed to dig in and camouflage their positions. And then he saw a dust cloud on the horizon. The call went through the radio net. "Everyone get ready. Here they come!"

5 minutes later

"Fuck, fuck, fuck..." Johnson muttered the curse word like a mantra. Somebody from intel had really fucked up. 'Battalion, my ass! That's at least two battalions they have crammed into these uparmored transport trucks that count as IFVs out here!'

About one kilometer away, the enemy had began dismounting under the partial cover of a small hill, while two already fully dismounted platoons were moving in their direction, now perhaps 600 meters away. Johnson turned to his radio operator. "Get Battalion on the horn. Tell them about the intel fuck-up and try screaming for some reinforcements, fire support and so on. If they can spare anything, I'd be a happy man."

Taking his binoculars back to his eyes, Johnson watched the enemy. 'Pretty good, for locals', he thought. The probing unit, apparently militia from one of the other city-states, was armed with a mix of assault and battle rifles and Johnson saw at least one portable SRM-launcher. They had spread out and were closing in, systematically using whatever cover was available. Which was not very much, one of the major reasons why Johnson had chosen this place for his position.

"Sir, Battalion says that they are fully engaged. The Major's promise is the only thing they can give us."

Johnson swore again. Then, looking back towards the enemy, he decided to start the party. He activated his com. "Okay, people. As soon as the guys cross the 500 meter mark, we will engage. The machineguns will fire first. Bernard, Chu, try taking out the officers, followed by the SRM-troopers. The rest of you has permission to fire at will at 300 meters or less."

The next minute was spent in tense silence, until one unlucky militiaman crossed the 500 meter marker. More than three dozen machineguns opened fire, aimed at just two platoons of militia.

20 minutes later

Mortar shells exploded around the trenches and foxholes as the militia started another attack. This time, Johnson saw them deploying about 250 meters out. The last time, they had used their trucks in an attempt to drop their guys right on top of the defensive line, but the LAWs of his men had taken care of that, leaving several burned out husks littering the plain before them, accompanying the corpses strewn about.

Not that the defenders had come out unscathed. Johnson could see the blood-splattered foxhole, a single body still inside, right next to his position. A direct hit from a mortar shell had outright killed one and severely wounded the other occupant. More losses had been suffered all along the line. Worse, many of the company's machineguns were either low on ammo, on their last replacement barrel or both. *And* the last attack had come close enough to warrant the use of the claymores and explosive charges they had set.

He suddenly heard a distinctive boom as, five meters behind his position, Corporal Chu used his anti-material rifle to take a militia lieutenants' head straight off. Momentarily distracted, Johnson could see that the mans expression had hardly changed at all. 'Bastard has ice water in his veins.'

Still, Jonhson knew that things were going in their favour. They could withstand another one or two attacks and by then, they'd have a big friend or two in the field.

Then the situation radically changed. The last salvo of mortar grenades slammed into the ground, a mere 30 meters from his forward trenches, releasing thick clouds of smoke. From behind the smoke, Jonson could hear a battlecry.

10 minutes later

"Where are those damn reinforcements?!" someone besides him screamed. Johnson didn't answer. Rather, he sent another burst downrange, towards the enemy troopers that had overrun the forward trench. One of them fell, but the rest still pressed on, now supported by heavy fire from their trucks. Some LAWs struck back at the trucks, but it wasn't enough. They were pinned down.

"Left flank!" someone cried. Looking over, Johnson saw that a squad of militia had reached the second trenchline. The trench was now embroiled into a melee of grenades, point-blank bursts and, in some cases, knives and rifle butts.

"Goddamn!" Johnson ordered the last two reserve squads to pluck the gap, before exchanging more gunfire with the militia platoon now occupying the forward trench. He ducked back into his hole as their return fire impacted the ground all around him. 'At least their mortars seem to have run out of ammo.' Several shoulder launched SRM exploded nearby, deafening the Captain for a few seconds.

And then the ground shook in a rythm that he knew all too well. His radio came into life. "Copper Six, this is Iron Two. Need a hand?"

A shadow fell over Johnsons position, before he heard the one sound no infantryman in the entire Inner Sphere ever wants to hear.

The entire forward trench burst into fire as *Flashlight* doused it with it's Mech-scale flamer. A few militiamen had almost managed to get clear and now ran around on fire, screaming in a way that made Johnson pity the poor bastards. Most inside the trench, mercifully, died too fast for even that. A sickening smell of burnt flesh began to permeate the air, adding to the already present aroma of blood and gunpowder. Inside the inferno, ammunition and grenades began to cook off due to the heat, as both the remains of the militiamen and the mercenary troops they had killed were reduced to charcoal and ash.

A split-second later, one of the militia's trucks exploded as it was hit by a Large Laser.

The surviving militiamen that were still able to do so surrendered

very quickly after that demonstration.

30 minutes later

"I have the final tally, sir. We have 47 dead and 56 wounded, 25 of those severe. The regulars have 12 dead and 40 wounded, 12 severe."

Johnson closed his eyes and inhaled. 'Too many', he thought, 'too many. It's like Thestria all over again.' "Thanks, Corporal. Tell everyone that that was good work out there."

Behind him, the medics had by now cleared all the wounded. Leaving only the dead and the burnt out vehicles littering a scene right out of hell. Dark smoke was clouding the sight of corpses, craters and ruined trucks. Somewhere, MG ammo in a burning truck was brewing up. The former forward trench was still burning. "The only thing worse than a battle won...", Johnson muttered.

Flashlight and Nedeljko had only waited until they had rounded up the remaining militia, a bit more than one company, before departing towards the south side of the city.

Johnson looked south. The guns still rumbled. 'I just hope this is over soon.'

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Earth
9 August 2006

"So... heat sinks."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"Our friends in Britain have been asking around about them. I heard that they got working fusion but didn't put in enough cooling equipment."

"So you want to know about the state of heat sink..."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"...research on Earth?"

"Yes. A quick summary if you please. How soon can we make them?"

"Oh, that's easy. We – that is Earth - make heat sinks..."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"...right now."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. See, we got a whole bunch of different samples of heat sink..."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"... models that were made by different BT manufacturers. That let us see the principles behind BT heat sink..."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"...technology and let us design our own. Really, it's such an elegant

design that's efficient, modular, and capable of working in a variety of environments including vacuum and microgravity. Best of all, it doesn't use any 'magic BT materials'. At the moment, Earth's current heat sink..."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"...production is going to maintaining all the BT stuff we got. But I hear the business guys are looking into Earth-side applications though. You ought to talk to them if you want heat sinks..."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"...for the next fusion reactor."

"Excellent, I'll do that. But I've heard that BT has 'double heat sinks'."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"I've heard that they're twice as good as the regular... kind. Are we making those, too?"

"Not right now, no."

"What? Why not?"

"It's the 'magic BT materials' syndrome again. BT makes their double heat sinks..."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"...using a light weight crystalline polymer for plumbing in their radiators. That lets them get away with less overall mass for the same amount of heat reduction capacity as regular heat sinks."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"And we can't make this crystalline polymer?"

"Oh, we make it today, or something close to it anyway. They're used

for cooling CPU chips in modern computers."

"But if we can make the material, why can't we make double heat sinks?"

"HEAT SINKS!"

"Are you kidding? There's a world of difference between a tiny sliver of the stuff used in computer chips and making a solid metric ton of complicated plumbing for a heat sink."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"Last I heard, the manufacturers are still trying to figure out how to scale up the manufacturing process without breaking the bank. Until we figure that out – and don't ask me for an estimate on that – then no one is getting double heat sinks."

"HEAT SINKS!"

"Well, thank you for your time. It was very informative. But why are those people shouting every time someone mentions 'heat sinks'?"

"HEAT SINKS!"

"That's very annoying."

"Hey, it's a drinking game. If you wanted dignity and formality and all that shit, you should have visited during business hours instead of barging into my home on our day off. Now excuse me, I need to get drunk."

Port Krin
Antallos
August 9th 3021

"Here's the report, Major."

Nodding, Staedele took the clipboard from the techs hand before resuming to nurse his aching head. The day before, some bastard had hit the cockpit window of his Mech with a SRM. It had been a beautiful shot, so much the major had to admit. It had also pretty much ended the battle for him, as he had to RTB because his co-pilot was unconscious and he was obviously suffering from a concussion. 'At least I shredded that bastards Javelin at the same time.'

Going over the report of his unit's status, a small smile came into his face. His wife had always hated writing these. He would have to edit it a bit before relaying it to battalion.

Iron Lance Status

Iron 1

Armor: 55%

Internal Structure: 95%; light damage left arm

Ammo: Fully loaded (Stockpile for smoke runs out!!!)

Component damage: left arm and shoulder activators damaged; PPC 2 heavily damaged

(IT'S NOT MADE FOR PUNCHING!); Small Laser 2 inoperable/reason unknown (ARGLEBLARGE!)

Repair status: Materials provided by salvage, estimated repair time 36 hours

Pilot: light concussion; fit for combat in est. 6 hours

Co-pilot: light concussion, fractured arm; out of service for at least 2 weeks

Iron 2

Armor: 70%

Internal Structure: Undamaged

Ammo: N/A

Component damage: Light damage to Medium Laser 3

Repair status: See above for materials, estimated 6 hours repair

Pilot: Fit for combat

Co-pilot: Fit for combat

Iron 3

Armor: 45% (Tell Chris not to get herself into that kind of trouble!)

Internal structure: 80%; damage to left torso and leg

Ammo: N/A

Component damage: Left knee and hip activators heavily damaged;

Large Laser 1 and Medium Laser 2 destroyed

*Repair status: See above for materials; estimated 4-5 days repair time
(She really busted it this time.)*

Pilot: heavy concussion; out of service for at least 2 days

Co-pilot: medium to heavy concussion; out of service for at least 2 days

Iron 4

Armor: 65%

Internal structure: Fully intact, save left arm

Ammo: N/A

*Component damage: Left arm ripped off (WHY? Oh god, WHY!?!); right
knee activator malfunctioning*

*(GDI gave us a salvaged one. I'll rip the old one out completely. No half-
baked measures anymore!)*

*Repair status: Arm salvaged, see above for materials; estimated 7 days
repair time*

Pilot: Fit for service

Co-pilot: Fit for service

And then came the part he feared.

Copper Company Status

Fit for duty: 44

WIA: 35 (recovery times between 5 days and at least 3 months)

KIA: 62

Ammo:

6mm caseless: 20% (Nobody out here uses 6mm caseless!)

7.62x51mm: 100%

.50 BMG: 100%

LAW: 74 shots remaining in reserve

His infantry had been bled white holding the northern approach. He hated writing those letters. He hated it more than any other part of the job. At that, he would have to ask whether some of the killed had relatives still living in the Sphere. If so, he'd have to talk to Al Azzim about sending a message via ComStar to inform them. 'Hmm... would also be nice to let the MRB know that we're still active.' After all, it was pretty much an open secret. The comment of the Combine representative when she saw him in the HQ a few hours before had made perfectly clear that she knew who he was.

And, it also left another question: Would he recruit new men here on Antallos or wait until the return to Earth? He decided on eEarth. Way more trustworthy people than the scum of Port Krin and it wouldn't cause as much of a new shitstorm back on Earth. His publicity was already worse than he liked.

Now, the 6mm caseless for the TK Assaults would be another problem, at least till they returned to Earth. As irony had it, somehow everybody missed the part where the new toys they had gotten in the 'Pirate War' also included rifles firing caseless ammo that reached similar amounts of penetrative power as a full-blown normal rifle round. Only after another TV show his men had 'advised' showed them off (What was it? Post Call? He couldn't remember. But watching a pile of melons being shot was fun.) it dawned on quite a few people. The day after it had been aired, which was just two days before the first jump on the journey to Antallos, he had found his message folder overflowing from all the queries from small arms producers around the entire planet.

He sighed. If Triesting - Kelang Weapons ever found about this, they'd probably hire a Merc company solely to get him six feet under. Or there would be the mother of all patent rights lawsuits. He was unsure what he feared more.

And then he saw a note tacked to the bottom of the clipboard. It simply read "Salvage plan is go!" This caused a genuine smile. He had asked a few questions and made some requests, which ended with

him being allowed to take a few things from the salvage pool that GDI considered as pretty useless junk.

"Well, they have already functioning, dedicated vehicles in the salvage pile," he muttered. As it stood, he had salvage rights for four spare, slightly banged up Thumper artillery guns and plenty of ammo. And six of the armored 40-ton trucks the militia had used as improvised APCs to attack his infantries' position. The techs would have a lot of fun with that after fixing the Mechs, he mused. And Hinze would be positively ecstatic about being finally back to being an artilleryman and not an assistant tech.

Jumpship *GDS Tripoli*
Zenith Jump Point
Sol II
Grantville Cluster
10 October 2006/3021

"...jump complete," the navigator announced as the universe snapped back into existence.

"Radar online," Constanza reported. "Looks like the *Montezuma* is still with us, sir."

"Good, good," Lieutenant Colonel Petronov, CO of the Jumpship *Tripoli*, acknowledged with a thick Russian accent. Despite being effectively a trash hauler, Petronov was still proud to be the CO of one of Earth's few Jumpships despite being named for a historical American victory. Jumpships were effectively irreplaceable for the present and utterly vital if Earth were to operate on an interstellar scale. "Sanchez, warm up the transmitter and let us send the mail to Earth."

"Yes, sir!"

"Ah, it's good to be home," Petronov mused aloud as his multinational crew went efficiently about their business.

Of course, that was the moment the alarm klaxons went off.

"Lidar pulse!" Constanza announced. "Madre de Dios! We're being targeted!"

"Battle stations!" Petronov ordered over the shipwide intercom. "Talk to me Constanza! Where is it?"

"Got it!" Constanza said. "Lidar originating from unidentified vessel decelerating at three gees to rest at five thousand kilometers. Warbook doesn't recognize it."

Five thousand kilometers? Petronov thought furiously. That was

certainly out of their own weapons range, but if this unknown bogie was using lidar to target his little flotilla, then Petronov must be in their effective weapons range. But Earth was isolated from the Inner Sphere; who would be operating unknown ship types out here?

"Sir, message from the bogie," Sanchez reported. "They say that they're the *GDS Monitor* and demanding that we ID ourselves and prepare for an inspecting boarding party."

* * *

"I trust that you are satisfied, Captain?" Petronov asked scathingly.

"Sorry, sir," replied the hulking figure of Captain Robert Beaufort. The apparently prototype power armor he was wearing was certainly bulky, especially with cold gas maneuvering pack on his back and modified SAW slung at his side. The armor was apparently powered by a captured laser rifle battery. "It was SOP developed after your departure. Someone thought that if the Expedition could get into Port Krin by pretending to be someone friendly and using captured ships, someone else could do the same."

Petronov grunted. It made sense after a fashion, even if it irked him to be on the surprise receiving end of it.

"Very well then, Captain, I imagine that you will be needing to get back to your ship," Petronov said. "But could you answer a few questions for me?"

"Of course, sir."

"Ah, good." Petronov pointed at a monitor. "What is that?"

"That" was the ship that had identified itself as the *GDS Monitor*. It looked for all the world like a one hundred meter long soda can with all sorts of strange antenna and arrays poking out of hatches in its hull at all angles. It was like no ship that Petronov had ever seen or studied.

"That's the *Monitor*, sir," Beaufort said with pride. "It's Earth's first

home built space-going warship. We call it the *Monitor* because that's what the BT fiction calls warships that can't jump or be carried on an FTL jump: monitors. Our baby here can dock with jumpships, but she doesn't have the fiddly bits that will let it be carried through a jump intact."

"How did it get built so fast?" Petronov asked. "When we left four months ago, we still had not managed to build a working fusion reactor, let alone a transit drive. For that matter, we were not making BT grade armor in any large quantities either."

"Oh, well, we cheated, sir," Beaufort explained, slightly embarrassed. "I heard that the *Monitor's* transit drive was actually salvaged from a wreck at the bottom of the ocean. But everything else except for a couple lasers is Earth built. Sensors, nuclear missiles, armor... the armor is actually just plain steel with a layer of depleted uranium sandwiched in for radiation shielding."

"Impressive, Captain," Petronov said, shaking his head. Privately, he wondered what kind of jury-rigged mess the *Monitor* must be to have been built so quickly. "So if the *Monitor* is here, who is covering the other jump point?"

"Um, no one is, sir," Beaufort answered. "Every Dropship left in the system is currently either being used to ferry up equipment from Earth to jumpstart a space industry or patrolling the system looking for rogue rocks. The *Monitor* herself is on her shakedown cruise and it was pure luck that we were here when you jumped in."

Crazy Habib's Bar and Grill
Port Krin
Antallos
August 11th, 3021

Without so much as a glance from the local riffraff, the door of the grungy hookah bar swung open and a man in nondescript local dress stepped inside with a thin smile on his face. Habib, the owner of the place glanced over and, after a moment went back to his duties. He knew who it was, and while the individual had received a bit of a promotion, which had made him a local VIP, he was still an old regular, and was known as a man who valued his privacy, and if there was one thing this institution valued itself on, it was respecting that privacy.

Brevet-Colonel Hajji Aladdin Al Azim smile faded into a frown as he saw a scantily clad girl in harem dress serving Turkish style coffee to the clientèle. He knew this girl to have been a slave in the ownership of the head of the establishment.

Slowly he walked over to her and coughed.

"Excuse me."

She smiled behind her thin veil and her large expressive brown eyes met his own. "How can I help you?"

"Are you still a slave," he asked. "If so I can help you."

"Nope," she replied happily. "Once the decree went out he cut me loose, then offered me a job. My pay goes into room and board, but I get to keep my tips. Thanks for caring though, it was sweet."

Having put his mind at ease, Aladdin nodded respectfully to the owner as and walked over to a booth in the far corner of room. In it was sitting a swarthy, unkempt man with a long beard in well robes and turban. Al Azim knew this man well. He was Ishmael Acar, the chief of one of the many bandit tribes that wandered the deserts of Antallos, his contact with the greater Hidden Muslim movement

throughout out the hated Draconis Combine, and ultimately a good and faithful man.

"Sit, my friend," Ishmael said calmly as he took a huff of the water pipe and slowly exhaled the tobacco smoke. "Here, it is peach today."

Aladdin smiled warmly and joined him, partaking of the flavored smoke.

"So why did you call me to this place today?" Ishmael said coolly. "And why are you wearing the colors of this GDI. Have you abandoned the fight?"

Alladin smiled widely. "Of course not. 'Motherload' is a holy place," he said with absolute conviction. He paused for a moment thinking of how to explain things to him without giving up the secrets he swore to uphold, but tell the truth. He'd just have to speak in half-truths, not lying without telling him anything he'd been sworn to keep secret.

"While not all of its people are Muslim, many millions live on the planet in peace with their neighbors. These people have built flawless doubles of the great holy cities of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism as they were before they were put to the flame by the Great Satan."

Ishmael gasped. "Surely you jest."

He shook his head. "No, it is true. I believe that Motherload is Allah's gift to the faithful of the Sphere in thanks for our maintaining our faith even in the face of adversity. I have stood at the gates of the Great Mosque and protected it from Vorax's bandits. I have circled the Kaaba and knelt before The Rock."

"Replicas you mean." he said coolly.

"These are the true and authentic holy artifacts long lost, preserved and intact by what must be the hand of Allah himself. They are real my friend."

"I find this heard to believe."

He shook his head. "I speak the truth. The holy places on Motherload are as holy as any on Terra. most holy world in the Sphere. Would I jest with such a thing?"

He paused and slowly shook his head. "No, you wouldn't. So it is true then? You've seen this New Mecca for yourself and it is real?"

"Mecca is very real," he replied. "I swear this to you before Almighty God. It is why I asked you here. While they do not wish to open the door to their world as of yet, for fear of conquest, one day these places will be open to the Faithful. "

Ishmael laughed. "Praise be to Allah! You have discovered a true treasure, my friend! This world truly is the Motherload!"

"I have a request of you."

"Ask and I shall do my best."

He handed him a data disc. "Send these messages for me. They are two fold. One is a call to the Faithful to gather upon Antallos as this world lies at the gates of this holy place. It is here we may enter, and it is from here we will defend. The second is a message I have for my brothers in to the Free Azami Army."

He frowned for a moment. "Normally I would do so without hesitation, but there is the issue of my reputation. Without some evidence I cannot do this. While I trust your word as I would my own eyes, too many will disbelieve, and if it is seen as a false message it will ruin my ability to reach out to our brethren."

Aladdin simply laughed. "My friend, do you truly believe I would place you in such a situation? The evidence is in the message."

Ishmael relaxed. "Then I shall see it with my own eyes and then spread the word."

"Thank you my friend, but there is one other favor I must ask of you."

"Then ask."

"I would also ask of you to swear your allegiance the GDI."

He frowned. "You ask a lot. Why should I do this?"

"They are good and honorable men who respect the freedom of all. While they are not all of the faithful, many of them are and most of those who are not are People of the Book. Even their pagans are receptive to the spirit of the Prophet's message. I ask you not to impede them, but rather help them navigate the deserts and find the lost treasures of the Star League. In exchange, this world will be rewarded with prosperity and security unseen since the fall of the Star League."

"And what of freedom?"

Aladdin simply laughed. "They enshrine the ideals of freedom and democracy to a degree that mocks the most ardent humanists of the Federated Suns and the most militant liberals of the Free Worlds League. They intend to set up a civilian government run by not an appointed Governor or Noble Lord, but by a democratic council elected that exists solely to serve the interests of the people, with laws that recognize that all are equal in the eyes of Allah and will ensure that men are to be treated as men, not as swine."

He slowly nodded. "Alright. I am convinced. It shall be done. I will work with them, but understand, I shall not tolerate duplicity."

"Thank you, friend. I give you my word that there will be none. These men are good and just, and their cause is a holy one I am proud to support. If you have any problems, do not hesitate to contact me." he smiled, "Now lets set as side such things. How is your wife? Was the child a son?"

He laughed. "She is in good health. The child was a girl, and she is as beautiful as her mother. We have named her Angela for she is as lovely as an angel. Now, did you meet a decent woman on this Holy World of yours, or are you content to die a bachelor?"

He blushed slightly. "Well, there is one girl."

Ishmael grinned like a shark. "Tell me about this girl of yours..."

Port Krin
Antallos
August 25th 3021

"So, to sum it up, it will take at least another three months before we can even begin the journey back to our families?"

"Yes, Marc." Major Staedele replied to Johnson.

They were sitting in an open-topped jeep that had just left the barracks inside Port Krin behind and was, rather quickly, heading north. A bit too quickly for the Majors liking. He really had no need to get into an accident.

Staedele addressed the driver. "Easy, private. We're not in a racing competition here."

"Yes, sir." The car slowed down. Somewhat.

"As I said, Marc, GDI won't let us pull out and head back to Earth before they are able to bring in reinforcements, especially after the bloodbath two weeks ago.

At least they were kind enough to inform our dependents and even pay for the HPG transmission informing those of our dependents that are in the Sphere. Granted, that gave them the ideal pre-text to take a look at our letters, but that's something I can understand. Every last spy on this entire rock must by now be in this city."

"Granted. Now, would you please tell me why you just stormed right into my office during my time off and dragged me into this jeep?"

Staedele answered with a smile. "Because the techs didn't ask you for two squads of security this morning without a reason."

A few minutes later
Just North of Port Krin

The jeep closed in on a small group of vehicles Johnson couldn't fully

identify in the distance. Closing in, however, he did get an idea.

"They're already done, boss?"

"The test will show, Marc."

As the jeep stopped right next to the vehicles, now identifiable as a group of 40-ton trucks, one of them with a big gun mounted on it, the two mercenary officers disembarked. A quick glance revealed two squads of infantry guarding the little impromptu parking lot.

They were greeted by the Major's wife. "You're late."

"Sorry, honey. So, how far are you?"

"Well, you're lucky. The firing test will begin shortly. We're firing at a set of pre-ranged coordinates about 15 clicks west of here. One of Marc's men is out there to observe the impacts. Today will only be a stress test. GDI can't really give us one of their FCS right now. And even then, I doubt that they have one calibrated for a Thumper. So, let's go over to the rest of the staff."

While walking over to one of the trucks, they were handed some ear protection and told to dial into the radio frequency they had reserved for the test. After about two minutes of further banter, it was time.

"Watcher, this is Shooter, do you copy? Over."

"Roger, Shooter, hearing you loud and clear. Target area is devoid of any movement. Fire when ready. Over."

"Roger, Watcher. Firing now. Shooter out."

With a roar, the artillery cannon mounted on what had been a jury-rigged militia APC just two weeks prior, sent a 155mm training grenade towards the target. Seconds later, the radio came alive again.

"This is Watcher, impact was 40 meters short of target. Adjust and fire for effect! Over."

"Understood, Watcher. Adjusting for range."

The next two shots went 20 meters short and 10 meters wide,

repectively. Then, the 4th grenade became a direct hit.

"Watcher, this is Shooter. Now preparing for maximum rate. Still no movement? Over."

"Watcher here, target area still clear. You are free to fire. Out."

The gun roared again. Once. Twice. Thrice in quick sucession. And then there suddenly was a hellish shrieking sound. "Abort!", somebody screamed.

One minute later

"Oh man, back to the drawing board."

"Assessment, Hinze?" Marie Staedle asked in a distinctively angry tone.

The man answering her, Eduard Hinze, was the perhaps best tech in the Cav when it came to wheeled vehicles, which was somewhat surprising, given that he had started his career in the Cav as an artilleryman. And he had made quite clear that he wanted his old job back, which had caused him to work with almost inhuman zeal at the conversion of the salvaged trucks.

Hinze sighed. "It's the outriggers. I told you that that could happen. The structural reinforcements on the vehicle were pretty good to begin with, it was meant for combat after all, and they held perfectly after we reinforced them. But the outriggers we bashed together were always the problem. They simply can't take the recoil. And the suspension simply can't take that kind of shock when they break, so we ruined that, too."

The Major interrupted. "So, how do we make them work?"

"Simple, sir. We need to pretty radically reinforce the outriggers and, at least in my opinion, reinforce the suspension. The latter as a security measure. While another failure will pop the tires, replacing those is chump change. Losing the suspension is a major repair job and immobilises the vehicle for a good while. All those measures will take away some armor if we don't overload the trucks and quite a bit

more work. But otherwise, it's not really a problem. The necessary parts are something we can get in any halfway decent repair shop, given how widely used these trucks are in the region. For the outriggers I think I can make up something from our own spare parts stockpile."

"Okay. I'll authorise the budget for buying parts as soon as we're back to base. Will there be any problems with our little wreck?"

"No, sir. We can pull it with the other trucks."

"Good. Good, good, good. This little project is still worth it. With a lance of Thumpers and two ammo haulers as well as the spare space for a security platoon, we have a nice, mobile fire support base in the making. I'm expecting you to get it working before we depart. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

The Rusty Union
Port Krin
August 27th 3021

"...and then he yelled at that car mechanic in a way that made even me blush 'till the guy finally got him the fitting spare parts. It was hilarious, I tell you. Hinze can get really scary if you try to fuck with him like that guy with his parts sale tried to."

This caused everyone around the whole table to erupt into laughter.

The Rusty Union was a somewhat small bar at the center of Port Krin, relatively close to the barracks complex. As such, it was by now filled to the brim every day with a mixture of mercenaries and GDI regulars, making it one of those addresses that personnel of the brigade could visit without being required to bring several people as company, for security reasons.

A condition that pleased Kai Dyer, assistant tech in the Buron Cav, very much. Now sitting right next to his compatriots from the Cav, he very much enjoyed the evening. When paying the waitress for a new round, though, he managed to let a coin slip from his hand. Under the laughter of everyone around, he ducked beneath the table to pick it up. And to put a small package out of his pocket and into a little mounting at the underside of the bench. Afterwards, he simply enjoyed the rest of the evening, got righteously drunk and woke up next morning with a serious hangover. Which also caused his boss, Mrs Staedele, to chew him out in front of the entire tech compliment.

And while Dyer was asleep, the janitor of the Rusty Union, forewarned by the fact that someone had uttered a code-phrase to a little street vendor outside the bar a day before, made sure to pick up the package while cleaning the bar and relay it to his contact, who would then relay it to the local office of MIIO.

But before that, said contact would make a copy of the microfilm contained inside the package...

Slums of Port Krin

August 29th 3021

"Jackpot!"

Philipp Gärtner was positively ecstatic. Being the head of the local office of the Lyran Intelligence Corps might sound good, but on a remote hole like Antallos, his job was often the very epitome of boredom. Not to mention that he hardly had anything at his disposal. Antallos was, quite literally, the bottom of the pile when it came to resource allocation. The last weeks, of course, had been anything but boring.

Turning one of MIIOs couriers into a double-agent had been the biggest coup he had ever landed. It pretty much made up for his near-inability to build up any network himself by listening right into almost anything MIIOs local office found out. And this here, this was the perhaps biggest hit he had ever landed.

"Your mood is pretty uncharacteristic, Philipp. Did our latest batch from MIIO turn out that well?", his assistant, Stephanie Oster, asked.

"*Well* doesn't even begin to describe it, Stephanie. This here is a veritable goldmine. It's photographs of a diary. The diary of a tech in that merc unit with those GDI people we identified, the Buron Cavalry."

"A diary?"

"Yes, a diary. And I have to wonder whether the guy writing it isn't in MIIOs pockets. This thing goes into detail like crazy. We have a description of 'Motherload', without coordinates, but at least we now know the number of jumps. Then we have information about... well, everything. Society, technology, an estimate of population numbers and assets, almost a full intelligence file. Well, there is some wacky things in there. Apparently, the motherloaders believe their planet to be Earth, as in THE Earth aka Terra. But even then, everything described about their technology in here matches what we and the Feddies have seen here on Antallos."

"So, how should we send THAT over to central, Philipp?"

"Good question. Seems like we'll have to get typing." He was interrupted by a loud groan. "Sorry, but there's no way around it. Trying to hide all these as picture files in a HPG transmission is pretty much impossible. So we convert them into text files and then hide them in the next video file message going out. Better not send that stuff openly, it's way too explosive for that."

"And here you go again with your conspiracy theories about Comstar."

"Oh please, Stephanie, it's not that. It's just that we had quite a few instances over time where HPG-relayed info got into the wrong hands. And if our little mole is correct, MIIO is seeing it similarly. They will use couriers or the hidden approach, too. So, we will now spend the next week typing all that stuff, because I don't want to involve any more people than necessary. I already looked up the schedule. Next routine video message is due in about a month, so, with a bit of luck, this little gem here will arrive on Tharkad in perhaps eight to nine months with all the stops along the pipeline and it being a low-priority message. Which means we also have plenty time to go over the data and write a first hand report."

"Well, you're the boss."

"Damn right, Stephanie. Now, how about we go drink something tonight to celebrate this? If I'm not totally wrong, we not only got ourselves a major coup and ripped off the Davions, we also outdid the goddamn Dracs for a change, despite them having more resources and personnel on this little rock than we ever had."

"You're paying."

Late post! Sorry!

**Dropship *Drakon*
Asteroid Drakon-26
Just outside Jupiter's orbital path
System S3-19570410
Grantville Cluster
16 April 2006**

The asteroid was a vaguely potato-shaped lump of rock about half a kilometer long and three quarters that at its narrowest. It utterly dwarfed the tiny bubble of metal and air that maneuvered to bring itself to rest relative to the thing. The Dropship had been passing by when the asteroid had been detected by radar. Simply matching course with the monstrosity told the slightly bloated crew everything they needed to know about its trajectory; it was definitely one of those that crossed Earth's orbit naturally and thus, a potential danger.

Jane Koltan nee Dietrich sat strapped into the seat of an unused station on the bridge. In one hand, she had a pen, in the other a clipboard that she studied intently.

"All stop in five," announced the current helmsman, one Lieutenant Junior Grade Alex Harmon. "Four. Three. Two. One. Mark! Sir, we are at all stop relative to asteroid."

"Good, good," replied one nominal Captain Hans Fitzgerald. "Let us see what we have here. Is the 'StarFury' ready for launch?"

Jane cleared her throat.

"Er, yes," Fitzgerald said, throwing her a glance. "Sensors, how does outside look?"

Jane nodded silently to herself and checked off another box on her clipboard.

"Remarkably clear of debris, Captain," came the reply. "This rock appears to be all by its lonesome. We're experiencing some slight

gravitational pull from it, but nothing RCS thrusters can't counter."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Fitzgerald said. "Now about that Starfury..."

Jane cleared her throat again.

"Oh, fine," Fitzgerald said grumpily. After puttering around the solar system for a week, he was getting tired of looking at nothing but colorless space rocks. But he still had procedure to follow. He hit the ship-wide intercom. "All hands, this is Captain speaking. We are now secure from acceleration."

Jane made another checkmark on her clipboard, hiding a smile. She never realized that teaching Dropship ops could be so fun.

* * *

The probe sidled up to the asteroid slowly. It was a boxy affair, a kludged together steel framework holding all manner of arcane equipment. Four, thick "wings" projected out from the main body in an X pattern and mounted a complex array of cold gas RCS thrusters on the end of each. For some reason that escaped Jane's comprehension, the Earthers called the thing a "Starfury", a rather strange name for a utility craft.

The Starfury had accommodations for a spacesuited pilot, but so far there had been never been any need to actually use it. The *Drakon* was close enough that remote control was essentially instantaneous. Watching over the shoulders of the Starfury controllers enjoying a shirt sleeve environment, Jane saw the asteroid surface loom up on the screen.

Aside from training prospective Dropship crews in the realities of interplanetary travel, the *Drakon's* mission was to hunt down errant asteroids. As Jane understood it, despite their rarity, a large asteroid impact would be utterly devastating on a planet, more so than all but the heaviest nuclear bombardments. Things became even worse given that BT technology made it trivially easy for anyone to go out and grab rocks to sling at planets.

Jane shivered at the thought. Until coming here, she had never heard of the notion in her life. She personally knew pirates who wouldn't hesitate to do such a thing if they ever heard of the idea. Such destructive power was supposed to be safely locked in the past along with nuclear weapons and the other horrors of the First and Second Succession Wars.

Of course viewed that way, Earth was the past come to haunt the present.

On the screen, a pair of mechanical arms driven not by myomers but by primitive electromagnetic motors reached out for the surface of the asteroid. The three fingered hands touched the surface, and instead of the arms bending slightly against a solid surface as the Starfury came to a rest, the hands broke the surface and buried themselves while small bits of rock drifted away.

"Hey, looks like we got another gravel pile," the controller managing the arms said. "Getting sample now."

A "gravel pile" Jane had learned was slang for an asteroid that was not solid rock, but rather a collection of small pebbles held together by the minute gravity of their combined mass. They tended to make up around half of the asteroids they had found so far. Most asteroids whether solid or gravel pile were just carbon and silicon compounds, pretty much uninteresting if you weren't a scientist. A substantial minority had a high enough metal or rare element content to mark for future space mining.

"Okay, spectroscopic data coming in now," another controller said. "Metal content's higher than usual and... wow."

"What is it?" Jane asked.

"I think we're going to need more samples," the controller said. "Preferably from different parts of the asteroid. And maybe throw in a deep core sample while we're at it."

"Does that mean we are going to have to hang around in zero gee some more?" Captain Fitzgerald asked. "This better be worth it."

"I think so, Captain," the controller answered. "Just from a few pebbles, I'm seeing large quantities of metals and rare earth elements, Titanium, Thorium, Rhodium, Rhenium, Germanium..."

"Germanium?" Jane interrupted. Germanium was invaluable, used in the construction of KF drives that gave humanity access to the stars. "How much Germanium?"

"Well, I'll need more samples to be sure, but based on this sample, the Germanium content is around oh... two percent or so."

"That doesn't sound like much," Jane said, disappointed.

"You'd think so," the controller laughed. "But that's better than you'd get from any ground side mine. And given its size, I'd ballpark this asteroid's mass at around one hundred million tons... give or take."

Which if refined, Jane translated in her head, would be about *two million tons* of the most valuable substance in the Inner Sphere. Suddenly, Jane felt dizzy.

"Ack," grunted Fitzgerald disgustedly. "I suppose we must be here for some time." He groaned. "I hate zero gravity."

Jane looked at Fitzgerald for a moment, then made another checkmark on her clipboard.

"I don't see why we should be haring off to Antallos," The graying elderly man said. He was a 'military expert' the network had dredged up from somewhere. "Sure, it's deplorable that there's such barbarity going on there, and it'd certainly be nice to get payback for them dropping a private army on our heads, but shouldn't we be focusing on building up Earth? Put more defenses in space so no more armies drop in on us? Fix gunrunning in Somalia before we worry about slavery in Port Krin?"

The younger, darker complexioned man across the table from him laughed off his objections. "Jake, Jake. Didn't you say yourself that the best defense is a good offense? The best way to keep anyone from attacking us, at least for the immediate future is not to get more weapons. First of all, since they don't know about our weapons, given that we don't have communications with them, the deterrent value of them is zero. Secondly, the guy running the show in Port Krin knows how to get to us. From what we've learned from our mercenary friends, he's been keeping that information close to the vest, but that could change. So we go over there and make sure he keeps his mouth shut. Sure, eventually others will find us, but that'll buy the time to build the defenses you want. Otherwise, Vorax blabs to the Feds or the Combine or Comstar, or the 'Star League in Exile', and they come calling with real armies. And even if they really don't have warships, dropships are enough to do the "bombard them from orbit" trick. We don't have the firepower to prevent a determined enemy nation from neutralizing our space-borne assets and dropping rocks on us until we say uncle. Yet, anyway."

"So we send a few James Bond types to silence the guy. There's no need to occupy the place. We have enough of our boys in hostile territory doing so-

called 'peace keeping' missions as is. I just don't see the rationale in putting our servicemen out there at the end of such a long logistical trail." Col. Jacob Framke, ret., wasn't ready to concede the point yet. Certainly not to a damned noncom.

"See, that's your problem. You keep treating Antallos as being analogous to Somalia. It's not. Somalia has problems to be sure, but aside from a few jokers in speedboats who really don't rate the title of pirate, they keep their problems to themselves. Antallos exports slaves and pirates by the bucket-load. I was a Marine, as you know. Our anthem starts with 'From the halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli.'" He actually sang it, too. "Tripoli was the capitol of the Barbary states, a collection of princedoms that ran their economies off of piracy and blackmail. The US government got fed up with their shenanigans and sent in the Marines. Presto, no more pirates. That's why we need to hold Antallos. It's the supply base for pirate activity in this region of space. If we don't hold it, someone will set up shop and service pirates there even if we get rid of the current leadership.

The talks show host, trying to head off the argument, interjected. "So Mr. Parker, you don't feel that the social issue is a factor in the decision to enact a 'regime change' in Port Krin."

"Oh, I do." Gunnery Sergeant Nicholas Parker, ret., assured the woman. "But my colleague is off target on the 'social issue' as well. To be frank, we need the people of Antallos just as much, if not more so than they need us. We can bring them all sorts of aid and medicine and whatnot, but they've survived for centuries and could go on surviving without any action on our part. We, on the other hand, went from being one world encompassing all of humanity, to a tiny outpost amidst a sea of humanity. And they're different from us, very different. Culturally,

technologically, economically, everything but genetics, and I'm not too sure even about that. Even if by some miracle we don't fight any wars, we're going to have to interact with these people, engage with them, live in their cultures and accept them into ours. We're eventually going to send people to places like New Avalon or Carver V or Strana Mechty, and expect them to stay there to negotiate treaties and run businesses.

Talk to the guys who run the Peace Corps, sometime. They send people to live in different cultures. Enthusiastic, energetic, committed people. Two thirds of them are back within a year, because they just can't handle how different the culture is. Can't even hack a two-year assignment in a mere foreign county. And that's without leaving the planet. What are we going to do when we have to send people to, say, the Cappellan Confederation? They won't be able to call home when they feel homesick. Home will be many jumps away, and days off even by Comstar's shady mail service.

Do you have any idea what that meeting other, vastly different cultures, entails on the societal level? Historically, suddenly encountering a different people has caused massive social and political upheavals in societies. Look at what happened Japan when Matt Perry forced them to open the borders at cannon point. Near-disintegration of the existing social order. It's unlikely we'll see anything quite that drastic when we introduce our culture to the Inner Sphere's, but there's going to be rapid, destabilizing change on both sides.

Antallos is a potential social and cultural laboratory, someplace where we can begin the cultural diffusion in a relatively controlled setting. Fixing up Antallos isn't just a charity gig. It's a desperately necessary venue for teaching people from earth how to deal

with the socioeconomic and political realities of the Inner Sphere. Hell, some of them might be able to help us steer our way through the changes back here on Earth. They've lived with the technological set up we're just beginning to try to understand. We don't know much about the working of interstellar economic and political interaction, because we've only just started operating jumpships. Earth's finest minds have been trying to puzzle out how they've maintained a civilization so long with such limited capacity for transport and communication for over a year and are still drawing a lot of blanks. The most important part of the Antallos operation is going to be exchange of knowledge, and honestly I think we'll be getting a good deal. It may be a hub for illegal comers, but it is still a commerce center. Just the kind of place we need to help us figure out how the Inner Sphere works and how to adapt to it."

That, Sergeant Major Nichalos Parker thought, should give that pompous ass something to think about.

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Port Krin
XX 2006

"For a place that's been described as a wretched hive of scum and villainy, Port Krin sure seems quiet" Rachel Dawes noted wryly.

"Shake up in the power structure. The small fish are waiting to see which way things fall before they come back out of hiding," Nicholas Parker explained. The ex-Marine noncom, as the attorney had discovered, was a virtual treasure trove of experience and knowledge about war-torn societies and social upheaval.

"Guess you won't be seeing the criminal element today, ma'am" Lieutenant Joseph Chalmers told the lawyer. "Hope you're not disappointed."

"Oh, no," Rachel laughed "I prefer to see crooks from the safety of a courthouse, thank you."

Laisa rolled her eyes at the annoying woman. She understood the logic behind the old saw of 'send lawyers, guns and money,' but that didn't mean she liked the woman who had invited herself along on this stroll down to the dockside district. If it wasn't for the fact that the gangs were lying low, she'd be seriously worried that the gregarious woman would get them all killed.

Seeing a familiar establishment, Laisa smirked. "If you want scum and villainy, you can always look in there."

Rachel followed Laisa's pointed finger, and found herself looking at what was clearly a cathouse. She flushed red briefly before managing to control her embarrassment. "I may just do that. At a guess, I'd say that establishment probably violates the anti-slavery edicts we'll be implementing."

"Sideways with a stick," Laisa agreed, under her breath, and suddenly gasped as she recognized the short, straw-haired boy emerging from the brothel, clutching a brown parcel.

She bounded forward to intercept the youth. "Wormie, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

The boy jumped, startled, and stared wide-eyed. It took him a moment to recognize her. "Auntie Sass." He withered under her glare.

"Are you running *Spark*, wormie?"

The boy squirmed. "Berry got an infection. I need the glit."

"Damnit, Fixer's suppose to cover that when it happens."

"He says she was negligent. Says he's not lie-a-bul. It's a lie, alright, but what am I supposed to do? He said he'll get her the meds if I carry the Spark."

You're supposed to have me talk to him, Laisa thought. *Except I wasn't here*. Out loud, she said, "Pawn my kit. Not like I was using it."

"But then, how..." The boy seemed to be at a loss for words.

"I'd have gotten something to replace it out of the starboys, they owe me." Laisa shook her head. She was asking too much of the youth. "You did the best you could Wormie, it's not your fault. It was very brave of you to step up to cover Berry's expenses."

"I had to." The kid looked down. "He wanted to indenture Berry, at first."

"He what? I'm going to kill him."

"Woah, slow down," Rachel cut in, almost making Laisa jump herself. She's forgotten about her companions in her fury. "No killing. I can overlook the odd slaver being roughed up by angry troops, but I can't gloss over that, not if we're going to re-establish order in this city."

Wormie stared wide-eyed at the strange woman. "Is this your new boss, Sass?"

"No, thankfully." Laisa turned to Rachel. "Look, this is my turf, so let me handle it okay? The old rat bastard should know better than to stiff my crew. I spent the last few years training them to run district sanitation. We actually had the old industrial quarter's plumbing working again. Which won't last for long if the idiot has my kids using the sewage system to run drugs."

"That is shortsighted," Nick commented. "Whoever's in charge probably would have axed this guy if we hadn't come along anyway."

"Not helping," Rachel said icily. "Okay, so he's a slaver and a drug dealer. We can nail him on that. No need to play Punisher."

"You really don't get it do you?" Nick shook his head. "You don't make public services a part of the gang war by forcing them to carry drugs. That puts them on a faction, and makes them a target. Which screws over the whole city that depends on their work, when the

other side starts shooting them to close down that avenue of distribution. As far as the people of Port Krin are concerned, what he's guilty of is endangering the public welfare. Drugs and prostitution are just business as normal."

"As far as I'm concerned, he's endangering Berry," Wormie snapped, having gotten over his initial awe of the strange and imposing adults.

"Sorry, Wormie," Laisa said, embarrassed that she'd let argument take precedence over Berry. "We'll get a doctor to come see Berry."

"A real doctor?"

"Yes, a real doctor. You'll like her, I promise," Laisa assured the boy.

A smile briefly lit Wormie's face. Then he frowned. "Then what do I do with all this Spark?"

Comstar GDI Shuttle *Pasteur*
Septemper 8th, 2006/3021
Columbus Moon 'Armour'

The moon approached with a grim certainty. It had existed long before the Star League had taken this system for their own use, and long after their fall. What secrets had it seen? What treasures did it hold?

"We're receiving telemetry from the moon," reported systems technician Ramael Cross, his fingers dancing over the little keyboard inset into his station. Comstar really did have all the nice toys, and it had only taken a little to decipher what the various functions of the vessel were. The Von Braun's shuttle was far better equipped for this sort of situation than the Vittoria's had been- especially after the damage it had taken during the boarding op. "It's pretty garbled, but it looks like an automated beacon. I've tried returning the query, but it looks like their computers are down. No big surprise there."

"Interesting," muttered Sanford. He was still getting used to the Von Braun's seating arrangement, and it showed every time he fidgeted. "Take us in, but slowly."

"Acknowledged," Cross replied, manipulating the controls. Thrusters responded to his deft touch, and the little tank of a jumpship maneuvered to line up with the ancient bay doors. With careful maneuvering, the ship slipped between the scarred and pitted doors, and into the interior of the hollowed moon.

Almost immediately, a proximity alarm sounded- Sanford took only a moment to identify the unfamiliar noise, but Cross had been faster. The Von Braun halted, and then activated its exterior lights. Panning across their immediate surroundings, the form of a Colossus type dropship became immediately evident to them. It was docked, for a given value of docked, but looked like it had taken a lot of damage, and was connected to what they could see of the interior station only by a spindly little docking tube.

"That was close," Cross said to himself, then brought up the radar. While the Comstar ship was only equipped with a standard radar function, Cross had spent considerable time working in its guts to link it up to the holoprojectors. It was there he had discovered that the holoprojectors were distressingly analogue, and had required several extra hours to write up a conversion program and build a connector. "Receiving radar imagery now."

The main holo tank abruptly ceased showing technical readouts, and instead displayed the little shuttle that was the CEC - Pasteur. That ship in turn shrank, as the focus of the image expanded outwards. Sharply cut lines pointed out the segments of interior station, built right into the rocky mantle of the moon. Here and there station segments crisscrossed the interior, and further in was a hint of more docks.

"This entry appears to have been designed to serve dropships primarily- I'm picking up three, two colossi, and a third of indeterminate type. The aperture into the rest of the moon is narrow- I can get us through, but there must be some other entry for jumpships," Cross declared. Sanford eyed the schematic, and shook his head.

"It might be best if we explore this section of interior- try to find any further data before we go deeper," Sanford said. Cross maneuvered the Pasteur 'up' towards one of the cavernous dropship docks, and then halted the vessel. Say what you would about the IS, but Comstar certainly had an idea of what they were doing, almost immediately after Cross took his hands off the controls, a program devoted to stationkeeping popped up and started handling that task. "Let's go."

Cross nodded, and he and Sanford headed out into the corridor. Greeting them there was Private First Class Edmund Duke, currently on guard duty. Though all the Von Braun's crew had *theoretically* been accounted for, it was determined to be a useful precautionary measure.

"Sirs?" Edmund asked, tipping his head.

Three robed skeletons, hunched in cover. A closer inspection revealed each to be wearing a crucifix beneath their robes.

"What were holy men doing here?"

"Maybe they were going to bless the ships."

Two doors down the pair found another cache of bodies. These, however, were wearing a variant of the standard uniform they'd encountered so far.

"Looks like flight jocks," Blake mused. He shook his head, then leaned down and fished an old worn wallet from one of the corpses. "Pilot first class, Mirabelle Adante. SLDF."

< < Team Two, we've found an entry to the interior structure. Your PDA has been updated > >

The fragmentary map that was constantly being downloaded to the PDAs both team members carried- based on photos and tracking data, showed a glowing red dot further up the ring. A note next to it indicated that it was three levels 'up'.

"Acknowledged HQ, we're on our way," Grail replied, thumbing her radio. "Anything else in there?"

"Just some coin, and what looks like a photo of a girlfriend. Now there's an idea, maybe they were trying to get back home."

"Kerensky took all the military with him to Terra- they stripped Columbus of what they could and left," Grail said. "Unless they didn't... Maybe those tubes we found were so that the populace could wait to be recovered. Maybe they knew about the Exodus."

"It's possible. With all the bodies that are turning up, I'm beginning to think that it was some sort of mutiny."

"That... could be it. Hey Blake, check this out, it looks like-

"N.O.M.A.D. 0852 - Master Chief Petty Officer," Blake interrupted.

"Looks almost like that guy from Halo, doesn't he?"

The two moved forward and rolled the armoured green form over. While the resemblance was uncanny, there were some significant differences in the armour. The gold faceplate was very similar to the protagonist of the Halo games- but the nuclear reactor that would have made up the backpack was instead some sort of battery, and there were integrated firearms of some sort on the arms. A bulkier backpack turned out to be some sort of jetpack, and the armour was configured differently then that of the 'real' Master Chief. This N.O.M.A.D. armour was top notch. As they propped the body up, a chit attached to the armour's chestplate came loose. Grail caught it, and held it up to her eyes.

"I think it's a rank tag... huh... Master Chief Petty Officer... John Spartan," She said, reading the holographic inset. "I think the universe is screwing with us Blake."

"Let's get him to the rest of the group- they can take a closer look."

The armoured figure would have been far heavier then it had any right to be... if there were gravity. But as it was, the two soldiers easily lifted and pulled it with them. Up some several ramps, through a corridor or two, and to a big, sealed door, within half an hour they had arrived. Most of the other teams were already there, as was Captain Sanford.

"Ah, there you are. So good of you to make it," he said, catching Blake's eye. "What did you bring me?"

"When Fiction Attacks," Blake said, pushing the armoured figure 'to the ground'. "The probes pick anything up?"

"We had one do a close inspection- the airlock is secure but the other side was heavily irradiated at some point, and is exposed to vacuum. We think we can get enough power out of the batteries to get us through, but we'll need to find our own way back. Or, barring that, make the long spacewalk through the interior. The probes are on standby for that eventuality," Sanford explained. "On the plus side, one of our probes spotted the silhouette of a jumpship of some sort in

"So far, so good."

"It's worrying, what appears to have happened here. Who would design their reactor system to vent into the *interior* of a base?"

"I don't think they designed 'anything' to do that. From the reactors we found in the outer ring, I think someone blasted it open. Maybe siege weaponry of some sort-" Sanford paused, catching sight of a silhouette. There was a battlemech in here. Legless and lying on its side, but it was there. "How the hell did they-"

He looked back at the gaping hole in the hull behind it, and then at the scorched line traveling from its crumpled form to where the reactor had been.

"Oh."

"That would do it," Blake commented, while Grail nodded in mute horror. He pushed off, rising and reorienting himself. This station had been designed so that three of its four interior walls could serve as 'down', while the last served as a window into the interior of the drydock facility. "Picking up a bit of a spike over here- its reactor might be out of fuel, but I think its still intact."

"What class is it?" Grail asked, as she deftly maneuvered herself around the hulk.

"No idea. I'd take a look at the myomer, but the radiation appears to have eaten through it all. It's definitely a heavy of some sort though."

Sanford, meanwhile, was heading towards the far end of the section along with the other teams. Here and there they stopped when something caught their interest, but for the most part it was eerily silent.

< < Captain, you there? > > the radio sounded. The voice was familiar- one of the officers who had stayed back on the shuttle.
< < It appears our guest has woken up- He's lucid and wants to talk to our 'leader' > >

"Tell him he can wait, we're busy here."

< < Will do, sir. It also might be of interest to you that the physician has an estimate on his age. He's only sixty > >

"Not nearly as old as we thought then- must have been the result of being cooped up in such a place for so long. Tell him that he can join us for dinner- and invite the Precentor... and that Noon character too. They'll want to hear our story, I think, and I do owe them an explanation."

< < Acknowledged sir, Shuttle out > >

Sanford sighed, then pushed off and maneuvered himself towards the breach in the hull. Though this interior area was dark, from his suit lights he could see the debris that had no doubt been sucked into space when the breach had occurred. Cargo crates and bodies. Dust and echoes. He turned to head back, when he spotted a light. It was faint, in the far 'distance' further into the interior, but it was there. Lazily blinking.

"Wait a second," he muttered, counting time.

It was Morse Code, a simple repeating message. "Warriors of the League, may you rest in peace."

Someone must've set it long ago- and after all this time it was still running.

Certainly laying all these corpses to rest would have been a monumental undertaking. But perhaps someone had found this place... and left a memorial. A pity it would not be undisturbed.

"I need one of the probes to investigate the following coordinates. There's something there," he ordered, thumbing his mic. Receipt was swift, and after a few more moments, he caught sight of one of the ship's probes maneuvering down the crevice that led to the surface. Its powerful lights swept over the interior docks, and then it did a lazy roll, pushing itself towards the blinking light.

< < Looks like some sort of transponder and light assembly, tied into the base's power supply. It's very old. > >

"Not part of the base's construction then?"

< < Definitely an addition. There's a body drifting near it. We might not be the first to have found this place, but we won't know more until the tech geeks on the Vittoria go through their sourcebooks > >

"Well, alert me when you have something."

The line went silent, and once again Sanford found himself staring at the dark. He inclined his head, making a decision.

"These men will have their burial," he said quietly. "But they'll drift a little longer, I'm afraid. We have work to do."

"Then you'll be happy to know we got the airlock working," said Grail quietly. She had observed the effects this place was having on him, and while it was certainly something that bothered them all, it had hit Sanford remarkably hard. So she had stood and watched as he made his own peace with it. "We were just waiting for you to finish your inspection."

"Sure you were," Sanford joked. "Shall we get to it then?"

"You two need to get a room!" yelled Blake over the comms, startling them. Abruptly they were on other sides of the room, looking anywhere but at each other. "See?"

Grail's response to her partner was to merely push him, spinning towards the airlock. Though he had his lazy spin under control in mere moments, it had been a scary few.

"Don't do that, woman!"

"Don't be an ass, and I won't have to," she quipped. Blake merely held up his hands, knowing that any further argument was futile.

Omega Section, Armour Interior
September 10th, 2006/3021
Columbus System

The logs had been clear- a mutiny of sizable proportions was the cause. And everywhere the dead lay sleeping. After bypassing the flooded beta section they had made their way deeper. The bodies were fewer here, but the signs of military action remained. The bulkheads were peppered with bullet holes, yet atmospheric integrity had miraculously remained. As the teams explored hallways and junctions, taking data dumps from still active terminals, they established that the 'real' jumpship dock had been called 'Omega Section'. Further analysis of recovered material had derived a map.

Omega Section was the core- again hollowed out and filled with machinery. In the grim light of the dead interior, through impossibly huge but inexplicably sturdy windows, lay the jumpship docks. And while empty here and there, their cameras revealed a dark silhouette, slumbering in the darkness.

"You suppose that's this 'Damocles' they talk about in the logs?" Blake wondered aloud, eyeing some of the digitally enhanced images their cameras had produced. "Looks pretty damn big."

"Whether it is or it isn't matters less then getting the power back on," Grain interjected, pushing off towards one of several junctions with exposed cabling. Already some of the lights were on, and as more cables were carefully reconnected, the station lit further and further. The alarm was inevitable, of course. This sort of sabotage had been deliberate.

However, just as fast as the alarm had started, it had quieted.

"I'm worried. All teams, pull back to the main foyer," Sanford ordered. "Keep an open comm."

Receipt came across the board, and the teams began to gather. Some of them were merely curious, but others had their firearms out. Grail paid none of that any attention, making her way through one of the

active computer consoles as she was. The encryption had been laughable- a simple password screen that enabled full functionality on 'Kerensky will come'? Oh please.

"The hell?" she cursed, coming to a data readout- a system report printed just minutes ago, entering a database index of a few centuries of system reports. "About three minutes ago, there was an anomalous power drain in Omega Section- that's here. I'm trying to narrow it down, but it wasn't an alarm- this entry's flagged medical."

"He's watching us then," Sanford cursed. "Waiting to see what we'll do."

"He, sir?" Blake asked, casting his gaze across the foyer chamber. "The Knight."

"The same. Helmets on, people!" Sanford commanded. "I want tight formations, expect a single target. Armed, extremely dangerous. Possibly hostile."

"How do we catch him? If this Knight really survived all this time, he's got to know far more than we do. If he wanted us dead- I'd like to think we'd put in a good showing, but from what we saw of the bodies... he's far better equipped than us."

"And no doubt," Sanford paused, sighed, then raised his voice to a yell. "He'll be *extremely* unhappy when he learns that the Star League fell, and Kerensky abandoned the inner sphere to form his own little dictatorship on the far periphery!"

The effect was immediate- a shifting wall of colour appeared next to Sanford, but the Colonel was steady. He held a hand up- no one was to fire. As an external projection of holography faded to reveal the gray armoured figure identical to the N.O.M.A.D. recovered earlier, Sanford really hoped it wasn't going to kill him.

The voice was... female?

"Tell me more about what you know of the Star League, Successionist," she said evenly.

"Mara-358, SLDF Knight, I presume."

"How?" she gasped, though the break in her composure was quickly covered up.

"We pulled it from the logs," he said. "The requisition orders planetside mentioned your number, but not your name- but we found that in a love letter down in C Section. Pity, really."

"So they're all dead then? Much time has passed, it seems."

"Centuries," Sanford admitted. "And we are not successionists, come to claim this world to drag into our ever self-sustained mockery of warfare."

"You are soldiers nevertheless. And no Periphery state is as trained or professional as you appear," she eyed the flag-symbols that appeared on their various uniforms, under the GDI moniker. "That leaves few options. You are... not Belters."

"We're from Earth," Sanford said succinctly. "I can fill you in later- for now we need to secure..."

He pointed at the Damocles.

"You are not Star League," Mara affirmed.

"Lady, we're the closest damn thing you're going to get, I'm afraid," Sanford replied, sighing. Mara stared at him, eyes searching every line of his face, before nodding, once.

"You're telling the truth... That disturbs me more than you could ever know."

"Just you wait. It's not about to get better from here."

Guns down, Mara led the retrieval teams straight to the Damocles. It was such a small sacrifice to discover just what had made that man-Sanford, able to tell such a truth. And she could still kill them if she

needed to.

Yet in his eyes, he knew the word, and purposefully differentiated from it when he claimed he was from 'Earth.'

Earth, the cradle of Humanity.

Mara worried.

Three hours later they made it to the Damocles' personal dock. Large docking arms stretched out into the interior, and the massive jumpship lay in their tender embrace like nothing so much as a child taking a nap.

"Huh, that's odd. Roderick must have encrypted access," Mara muttered, as the doors refused them access. She frowned, trying to think what codes he would have used.

"A minor setback," Sanford said, gesturing to a pair of technicians. Their bulky spacesuits- larger than SLDF standard, but reinforced with armour weave, gave them a primitive look. But Mara knew to look beyond the surface details. National crests bearing old pre-hegemony flags, and hints of advanced technology here and there. The box they held between them was a computer. But what they expected to do with it was unknown. "We'll have to brute force it, it seems."

"An uplink then? You're going to allocate your ship's processing power to this task." Mara stated, coming to the conclusion slowly. It was not unheard of, but it was rare. Usually one had to either blast through such a locking system or crack it- and that tended to take a dedicated computing array. Such arrays were, of course, massive.

"Not exactly," Sanford replied, elaborating no further. He was then silent, and Mara found herself wondering. She glanced at the box, and the wiring connecting to the door. It looked... curious- both the box and the wires were a dull matt black, but the entire ensemble looked as though it had been constructed recently.

"Ah, hexadecimal, my favourite," muttered the first technician- Mara remembered he was named Marshall. He began tapping out... commands, it looked like, on a small keyboard attached to the arm of his suit. The hum of internal fans and other rotary devices reached Mara's sensitive ears as the computer came to life. Though she had no screen to view, Mara was on edge- something was happening.

"If it's not a datalink then... that's a computer? You expect to crack the encoding with *that*?" Linda asked, flabbergasted.

"Give it time," Sanford said. "If it's anything like the encryptions back home, it'll take at least half an hou-"

Ding the computer announced.

"Right. BT computers," Sanford muttered. Marshall and his partner chuckled, evidently this was some inside joke that Mara was not privy to. But before she could concern herself with such matters, the doors began to grind open. Beyond lay the Damocles and her bounty.

"I do have one concern, though. Since I'm technically a representative of the star league- are you just intend to steal whatever I haven't gifted you with? By writ, I am in legal possession of this facility," Mara asked, bringing a question to the fore that she had skirted around before. They hadn't said much on the star league, aside from the 'fact' that it had fallen. Now that they had this prize, Mara intended to get answers.

"The Star League's defunct. Kerensky gave up any right he had to it when he pulled out for the deep periphery to build his own little dictatorship. Comstar forfeited their rights when they turned into a self-centric religion and debased their founders vision to save the galaxy. Who would you put in power- one who craves it with every fiber of his being, or one who doesn't desire it?"

"The latter, of course. Power seekers are common- and fragile. They break easily."

"Consider us then- we do not desire power- we desire peace. But

unfortunately the universe drives a hard bargain. If we want peace, we're going to end up with a lot of power first. The SLDF is gone- disbanded and forgotten, save as the glorious golden ages of the past. The successor houses are the same as ever, embroiled in their petty wars for dominance, none caring about what they're doing to the galaxy beyond the sheer hubris that they can 'win' the wars they wage. But we both know they can't 'win'- if that were possible, they would have done so ages ago. So who would you turn to, if not us?"

"There was a movement for-"

"The re-establishment of the Terran Hegemony, yes, yes. It's a glorious idea, but it requires more war. First, to take Terra from Comstar, second to find yourself a Cameron heir- ours isn't interested, and third, to find some way to bring the successor states to the table. And you need to do all this in the next ten years, because after that *The Clans* are slated to show up."

"The what?" Mara could hear the capitalization.

"You didn't think Kerensky's faction was content to sit in their idyllic utopia in the far reaches of the distant coreward, did you? Why be prosperous and noble, when you can be barbaric, and powerful. It wasn't enough that they left the galaxy to centuries of war- no, they have to come back and make it all *worse*."

"For a group with such an intelligence network as you obviously have, it is strange to see you so interested in the materials you are recovering. I've been watching your men, Richard. They're not just recovering usable materials, but examples of technology- watches, radios. What use do you have for these things, when you have the resources for an intelligence network so vast and powerful?"

"Do you believe in magic?" Richard asked solemnly, turning to face her. She read the truth in his eyes. "It's not easy to grasp, but if you give your bond- for you and those under your command, I am permitted to tell you. I've already told you more than I should have."

My bond... Mara thought. "'Those under my command?'"

"About two hundred and seventy, in cyro tubes down planetside. Scientists and their families, according to the manifest. We're going to need to thaw them out to help with the cargo anyways- it would be much easier if we didn't have to worry about you galavanting off to form your own faction and getting yourselves- and us- all killed."

"You do, of course, have some time to think it over. But the word is yours to give- the old one that's awake told us that much, Lady Cameron," Sanford concluded. He smiled, then turned away from the SLDF Knight. "Alright ladies and gentlemen- we have a ship to get running. You know your duties, now get to them."

He leaned back, and his eyes met Mara's.

"You coming?" he asked, without a hint of guile in his voice.

Mara followed, as she had known that she would.

Wait....

"Jacob's alive? and Cameron *who*?" she asked, racing to catch up with him.

Columbus Base
September 11th, 2006/3021
Columbus System

Jacob Carter was experiencing bliss- bliss that first came in the form of a warm bath, then as fresh food, and good company. Though his minder was military, she was familiar- the first human face he had seen in nearly a year, a year of the madness of loneliness.

"More?" Norris Algaute asked of his empty bowl of soup. The medics had decided to get him acclimated to real food again slowly- so soup was the meal of the day.

"No. Thank you," Jacob said carefully. His throat was still sore from disuse, but the medicine had helped. "So... the moon."

"You were right about the Knights," Norris said. "Our team made contact with Mara, and they think that John is active as well."

"Good," he replied, taking a drink. He turned, and watched the lightening rainfall. Shafts of sunlight shone through the clouds, bathing the morning in a warm radiance. Jacob took all this in and more- it had been a long time since he had seen proper daylight.

"I'm afraid, though, that we'll be heading out shortly. Nearly three months of transit time, but we're needed back on Earth."

The way she said Earth was the way each member of this expedition said the word. There was no special endearment attached to the term, no 'new earth' or 'terra nova' or the like. Just Earth. Jacob had suspected Terra, but the reactions to that assertion were bewildering. Where were these people from? Further thought did little to illuminate the mystery, so Jacob Carter, nominal commander of Columbus Base, returned to his meal, and the vista before him.

If his saviours desired to tell him, they would. And if not, he was certain he would learn when the expedition returned to the world that cast them into the black on this mission.

"Actually, yes. More soup," he said. Norris nodded, and refilled his bowl. They sat in silence once more, each entertaining their own thoughts.

It was... pleasant.

Omega Zero Section, Armour Interior
September 16th, 2006/3021
Columbus System

Tele-Terminal Reporting Autonomous Adaptive Network... online.

Initiating primary protocols

Initiating secondary protocols

Initiating tertiary protocols

Greetings Mara...

"I need you to begin preparations to initialize lock down, code word Nomad Tango Marmalade Zero Alpha. We're going to be departing soon, and there's trouble about," Mara ordered, no nonsense in her tone.

The rudimentary AI- one of the Star League's best, said nothing.

"I know," she said quietly. Sanford and his team had stayed out of the central chamber, partly out of trust- and because Mara had told them, truthfully, that the auto-defenses that guarded the vault would not recognize them, and she would not be able to order them to stand down from outside. "Do your scopes show the people outside the Vault?"

Affirmative

"I want you to add them to your register. They are allies," she said.

Processing

"They will return- they intend to rebuild this place. Though they are strange and curious, they are not bad people."

Query: Point of origin?

"They say they hail from Earth."

Acknowledged.

Message Receipt: Spartan is active. Confirm Receipt?

"Sure," Mara.

Query: Star League status?

"It's been a thousand years- if those guys are to be believed, the League is dead and gone."

Star-Mapping confirms date.

"Huh," Mara said. "If they're telling the truth..."

Primary Directive.

"Yeah, yeah, revive the league and all that," Mara muttered. "I'm beginning to think the name is cursed."

Negative. 'Magic' is illogical and therefore cannot exist.

Query: Designate 'Earthers'... suitable for League Reformation?

"Not the League, but maybe something better," Mara replied wistfully. "I think they just might be our only hope, too."

Perhaps.

"I will see you again, I promise."

The Ark will be here when you return.

Linda nodded, and shut down the terminal as she withdrew her code chip. All the information for the lock down process, and accessing the auto-defenses was contained therein. And it was right, the Ark would be here when she returned. It had waited centuries, what was a few more decades?

Comstar G.D.S. Von Braun
September 17th 2006/3021
Columbus Orbit

He strode purposefully through the empty corridors, noting each detail and committing it to her vast memory. At the slightest touch,

they opened to show him their secrets. Though these GDI people were certainly advanced, and their encryptions beyond anything he had experienced, it was a simple matter to override them. Their hardware was parasitic in nature- existing as an unnatural graft on top of the pristine Star League technology. The last door housed a man- and he disabled him with a quick motion. His precise comprehension of human biology enabled him to strike once, and disable. The man fell, and he observed that too.

He was a guard. Though his weapon had the potential to be useful, it was better left alone. The operative had all that he needed already.

"Bridge," he said, accessing and recalling memories and schematics- ancient data flew before his eyes, and within moments he had a high-probability model of the ship. The steps that needed to be commandeered shone before his eyes.

While this ship was a newer model than those he was used to, it still had that old network of maintenance hatches that spread across its figure like an intricate spider web. The man recalled a precise name- Jeffries Tubes, and dismissed it. It was not important to his task. And so he continued onwards. A simple application of spatially oriented force propelled him down one tube- for everything was down- or up- in space. Such distinctions served only for record keeping.

Eyes keen, the operative passed several junctions- a few electrical interfaces out of repair, and one cannibalized to provide heat. The remains of a day old meal still drifted near. Approaching the one he desired, he applied a moderate amount of force, reached out, and altered his trajectory, shifting eighty percent of his momentum perpendicular to his original vector. Down the second tube he went.

"Boarding Operations," he said, the vocal key recalling all that he knew. Abruptly he had weapon schematics, rate of fire, estimates of crew composition, and data on how to counteract it all. He slowed herself as she neared the maintenance exit- there were voices echoing quietly down the hall. Two males and one female, discussing some topic or another. They were off guard- *good*.

Removing himself from the shaft, he set about slowing down his

breathing, going into a death-like trance. As such, he made no sound- or sound enough to be negligible to even the finest of sensors. Based on hearing alone he had identified the composition of the enemy soldiers, and so he struck heedless of any danger, because he knew there was none.

Her opponent countered.

"Krav Maga," he said appraisingly, and so he knew all that her opponent knew. She struck to hit in a way that such a practitioner could not counter. Except that the man *did*.

"Jeet Kune Do, actually," said the other man. But that name had no value assigned to it. Though the operative could translate the term, there was no datum in his records that matched it. The other attacked, and he countered- and learned. But he, even as skilled as he was, possessed only self taught data, and only recently. It was not enough time to build an effective model. The strike that disabled him also knocked the wind out of him, refuting any statement he could have made. Instead he was silent as he slipped into unconsciousness.

"I told you I could handle it," Sanford said, rubbing his shoulder. "But thanks for the warning. Now we just need to get him down to the med bay and figure out how to wake him up."

"There's no need. This was a sort of berserker state- but I should be able to awaken him without the need for medical intervention."

She turned and kneeled, placing a hand atop the fallen Knight's brow.

"John, I need you," She said. He was awake a moment later. He locked eyes with her- and when he determined there was no threat, allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. "John, I'd like you to meet Richard Sanford, commander of a reclamation expedition. From Earth."

"Hi," he said, holding out a hand. "Did I hurt anyone?"

"Only an NCO taking inventory- and he was only knocked out. Gave me a good workout though," Sanford replied, taking his hand and

shaking it. John raised a solitary eyebrow at this, glancing at Linda.

"No, I didn't take you down," she said, as though it were the simplest fact in the world. "Richard here has many talents."

"Including nearly getting my ass kicked by that berserker personality you've got," he elaborated. "I was lucky."

"I gather by the fact that Linda hasn't killed you that there have been some sizable sociopolitical changes in the time I was in stasis. So I think I need to be filled in before I try to convince her that stealing this ship and jumping to Terra is a bad idea," John interjected.

Sanford nodded.

Columbus Base September 18th 2006/3021 Columbus System

Romera O'toole was the oldest human survivor from Columbus base. At ninety eight, she was a venerable ancient, even compared to the likes of Jacob Carter, whom merely *appeared* that age. While she was currently being tended on by some young medic, her mind was wrought with questions. Before she had taken up the life of a civilian, she had been chief engineer on one of the base's many expansion phases. Though how these... GDI folk had discovered that little tidbit of history, Romera had no idea.

"Wait a moment," she said, taking a deep breath and perusing her memory. "There was never a supplementary fusion reactor at the planetside drydocks- everything was ran off the main circuits."

"Well, my men are looking what appears to be one, still powered and churning fuel. They're tracing the power lines now."

The man's name was Richard Sanford- a captain or admiral of some sort. He was tall, and stern looking- though his eyes occasionally lit with humour. Romera found that he was easy on the eyes, especially

for a woman of her age. She smiled.

"I suppose it could be a relic from one of the previous expansion phases. Why it's not on the schematics, though..." she trailed off, pondering. Sanford, naturally, had an answer to that quandry.

"Nothing new is *ever* on the schematics. The actuality of any architect's design very rarely matches the planned product. Sure, it might be nice to put the bathrooms in that little closet in C Section of the primary HQ, but then you need the plumbers to figure out how to get the piping in there, the electricians to get the wiring, and whoever your local inspector is to make sure everything's up to code. Far easier to just stuff them in the back of the pantry, seal that section off, and bore a hole through the wall of the hallway between E and D sections."

"Experience, Richard?" Romera always took to calling enterprising young men by their first names. It made them pay attention. "I thought you were a naval captain."

"My father was an architect," he said. Taking another look at the expansive plastisheet blueprints. "Useless as this is, it's our only map."

Romera refrained from smiling a cheshire grin, and instead adopted a put out look.

"Why, Richard, surely I could help. I know you've got wheelchairs here- I saw Jacob rolling around like it was in *style* yesterday. Just roll me over to where you need help, and I'm certain I could remember something... beneficial."

"I'll have someone come up with-"

"Or," she said, meeting his eyes. "You could take your old grandmother here around. She's been stuffed up here for a week and a half, with no fresh air, and little to talk to except her grandson."

Hook, line, and sinker. Romera didn't enjoy guilt-tripping people into doing what she wanted, but sometimes... sometimes it was the only viable course of action. She might be old, but her mind was *fierce*.

Being handed off to a bemused Jacob Carter did little to douse Romera's spirits at having escaped that oppressive hospital.

Jacob merely laughed for a good minute.

John Brown's body...

Time/Date to be determined by Troika..

"Mr. President? You have a call on line 3. It's Justice Albright."

Jack's brow went up in curiosity. Albright was known for conducting all his business in the afternoons, and rarely during morning hours, something he had a distaste for. What could have gotten him to change?

"Put him on, June."

"Yes, sir."

"Richard! It's good to hear from you. Isn't it a little early, though?"

"It is, Mr. President, but I have a personal request to make of you, so being the supplicant, I wanted to get things rolling earlier than I usually do."

"Okay, now you have me wondering, Rich. What's so important that a senior justice of the Court needs a favor from the president?"

"A secure video-conference, sir."

"Eh?" said Jack, surprised.

"I would like to officially request a live video-conference call between you and Robbie on your side and myself and my guest on my side of the call. I'd like at least ten minutes. That should be enough to decide if the subject is serious enough to warrant more time."

Ryan's instincts went on high alert. "And who will your 'guest' be?"

"I cannot say at this time, Mr. President. This is why I'm requesting a video-conference instead of a personal meeting."

The alarm bells inside Jack's head had just upgraded themselves to

air-raid sirens. "That sounds very dramatic, Rich."

"I'm afraid it is, sir. But given my interest in history and jurisprudence, I feel it is the only action I can take at this moment to prevent something from turning into a crisis, instead of merely dealing with it after it has already become a crisis as I usually do."

"All right, Rich. Is this FLASH priority? Or do I have enough time to fit this into my normal schedule?"

Albright sounded thoughtful. "We have some time, sir. If it can be done within the week, that should be enough. I think you'll understand further when you have the opportunity to speak with my guest."

"And I won't know who that is until the call?"

"I'm hesitant to mention it except over a secure line, sir."

"That can be arranged."

"If you would then, sir?"

"Expect someone from the Service with a secured cell in thirty minutes, then."

Jack hung up, mildly irked that Albright could still manage to make him feel like a newly hired intern, even after all these years. Still -- Richard had never been boring. Whatever was going on, it should prove interesting.

- - -

Albright was proud of himself. It took quite a bit to phase Jack Ryan, and he'd managed to squeeze fifteen seconds of confused silence out of the President before the inevitable questions began. Questions he'd answered with "That's what I need the video conference for, Jack."

Though he'd wager his seat on the bench that Jack would have every single agency under his authority digging up everything they could

on his guest.

After all, that's what Jack did.

He'd gotten the promise of the conference, tonight, no less. Cathy wasn't going to be happy, the fifteen minutes were coming out of time Jack had promised her, and she'd called to let him KNOW just how unhappy she was going to be if this wasn't of grave importance. References to the fact that she was a surgeon, and knew what to remove and how to remove it featured prominently in that conversation. Rich knew Cathy from years back, and knew when she was kidding.

This *wasn't* one of those times. He turned to his guest, sitting on the other side of the desk.

"I hope you're worth it, son. That woman can take you apart piece by piece with a scalpel. And once she's done with me, you'll be next on her list."

The guest shrugged. "I've told you everything, sir. And I haven't lied. I've withheld names, yes. But you're the one who had the final vote. You chose to make the call."

"Point taken, son. But I hope YOU remember you're lighting a fuse, and there's no way to predict how big the blast is going to be."

"Yes sir. But now, at least some people are going to know there will be a blast, and they can get the innocent away from ground zero before the explosions."

Albright snorted. "And I think we've run this metaphor into the ground. Let's have some coffee, and wait upon our illustrious leader to make the call. My cook has some excellent Jamaican Blue Mountain."

"Thank you sir. Now I know what kitchen to raid."

"Try it and die, boy. You have NO idea what hoops I have to leap through to get that stuff."

"Understood, sir. Could I at least have the name of your supplier?"

"If you get through tonight and you're still a free man? Yes. Because with the shitstorm you're about to kick up, kid, you're going to NEED good coffee to make it through the day."

"So that's your secret, sir?"

"Damned right."

- - -

"Mr. President."

Jack looked into the screen curiously, trying to see beyond the files he'd been given, the news bytes he'd been handed by his staff. "Mr. Becerra. I have to say, it's interesting to see you. I have to wonder why you went to all this trouble to contact me." He nodded to Justice Albright, sitting at the table next to the younger man. "You've essentially done an end run around the entire White House staff, going through Richard. Is what you have to say worth my time?"

"I believe so, sir. And it has everything to do with why Justice Albright asked the Vice President to attend this call."

"Oh?" Jack raised an eyebrow, sensing Robby's sudden interest.

"In short, sir, I'm about to make an offer. To you, to the rest of the world leaders, and to the GDI. It's not my offer. I was contacted by certain groups shortly after it became obvious that the case I'd started would reach the Supreme Court. They realized the ... opportunity... just as you did, Mr. President."

"Then out with it, Mr. Becerra."

"John Brown's body may lie in his grave, sir, but his heirs are marching on. Robby is black, you're Irish. Harper's Ferry and NORAIID."

Jackson rose out of his chair, eyes wide, while Jack leaned forward sharply. "You imply terror attacks, Mr. Becerra?"

"No, sir. The groups that approached me consider themselves to be the spiritual heirs to the Abolitionist Movement. But they don't wish to repeat the mistakes of the past."

Ryan reached for the file on his desk. "May I remind you that while you're retired, you're still bound by your oath, Sergeant Becerra."

"Yes, sir. I'm aware of that. The New Abolitionists want me to tell you they'd like to talk. They'll tell you what they're doing, where they're doing it, and how. Where their money's coming from. The weapons they'll be distributing to the oppressed off planet, when the time is right. They'll be honest with you, sir, and with the GDI. And they'll do their best to fit their plans into the larger picture, as it were."

"And what do they want in return, Sergeant?"

"Plausible deniability. No one currently in a position of authority will officially know a thing. BATF agents will be informed where not to look. IRS agents, who not to audit too closely. That sort of thing. Not all that different from the Mitre Corporation and the CIA, when you think about it, sir."

Jack thought about that for a long, quiet moment.

"And what do you get out of it, Mr. Becerra?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Why don't I believe that?"

"Sir, once this conference is over, I will return home. If requested, I will honor any speaking engagement I'm offered. Any remuneration I receive from those engagements will be donated to various charities. I'll become just another talking head on news shows, shilling for the groups I believe in. Aside from that, I've already achieved what I've set out to do." The grey haired man grinned crookedly. "I suspect the surveillance teams currently assigned to me will be grateful for the

rest."

"That's it? That's all? No glory, no accolades?"

The other man looked over to Justice Albright, then back to the camera. "Sir, you have my full 201 file, correct?"

"Yes."

The crooked smile returned, and he rubbed a shoulder as though to deal with an ancient ache. "I had my moment, sir. I'm glad I didn't know. I could have missed the pain, but I'd have had to miss the dance."

Jack flashed back to a moment on a London street. "I think I see." He closed the file and pushed it to one side. "Despite the... publicity... of your recent court case, Mr. Becerra, you're still a private citizen. I'm limited as to what I can legally order you to do. I cannot, for example, tell you to go home. I cannot tell you to ignore the surveillance team outside your house. I can't tell you to wait by your phone. I can't tell you a lot of things."

"What can you tell me, sir?"

"I can tell you I have a friend named Mr. Clark. He could be your friend too."

"Thank you, sir. From myself, and from a lot of people you'll never meet."

"Don't thank me, Sergeant. I expect we'll all be ruing this day for decades to come."

"Mr. President, that began the night the stars changed. For all of us."

"I suppose you're right. And Mr. Becerra?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Well done, Sergeant. She'd have been proud of you."

"Thank you, sir."

- - -

GDI Forward Operations Base Gettysburg
Port Krin
Antallos
11 August 3021

"Hey, check her out," Private First Class Dickens said to his partner. Their squad had been posted to gate guard duty at the main gate of the GDI's newly designated Forward Operations Base in Port Krin. The FOB basically consisted of little more than the Administration compound which was basically a fort in the middle of the city.

"Huh, who?" replied Private Timothy, taking his eyes off scanning the street in his own assigned sector.

"The hot chick in red and black," Dickens clarified. He puffed himself up. "She's giving me the eye, man."

"Dickens, we're on duty," Timothy told him. "Flirt with the locals on your own time." He glanced at the girl Dickens had pointed out. "Hmm, okay, yeah, she's hot. But her clothes look military and... is she wearing a sword?"

"I didn't see any..." Dickens began, then stop. "Oh, shit. She's coming over. What do I say?"

"You say what you're trained to say," Timothy said, exasperated. "Polite and professional. 'Hello, ma'am. What can I do for you, ma'am?' Stuff like that."

"Right, right," Dickens said quickly. He turned to the approaching young woman. "Hello, ma'am. Can I do you, today?"

Timothy groaned to himself.

"No, you ill-mannered peasant," the woman replied haughtily. "What you can do is take me to your commander. You could also put yourself on report for affronting my august self, but I suppose expecting you to be so honorable would be too much to ask."

"Wha?" Dickens said, confused.

Something in her words clicked in Timothy's head.

"Ah, ma'am, pardon my friend's manners," Timothy said politely. "But are you with the Combine ambassador?"

"I *am* the Combine ambassador," the woman replied irately. "At least I am until the Coordinator can send a proper one. Now tell your leader that Alicia Kurita, formerly a Sho-sa of the Sixth Pesht Regulars, is here to see him."

* * *

Alicia didn't want to be here. She was a mechwarrior, a samurai of House Kurita. She was a sword of the Dragon, beautiful and deadly on the battlefield. However, Alicia was not a politician. The vagaries of politics held little interest for her and deep down, she secretly feared that her lack of social graces would embarrass her House and lineage.

But when Alicia's regimental commander – who was her grandfather no less! – asked her to be their House's representative here, how could she honorably refuse? So here she was, waiting with two lowly guards for someone of suitable rank to come fetch her. It would have been intolerable, but one guard seemed to have honor enough to keep his boorish comrade from bothering her too much.

In due course, a man in GDI uniform appeared at the gate and ushered her in. The guards' reactions to him indicated that he was fairly high ranking, maybe even an officer. But it was difficult for Alicia to tell; these drab GDI uniforms all looked alike to her and she had yet to discern the subtle differences of insignia. But one she had picked up right away was the nametag sewn into the right breast of their uniforms.

"You are a Kurita?" Alicia burst out as the GDI man led her inside, her surprise causing her to speak in Japanese instead of English.

"Colonel Chou Kurita, Ambassador," the other Kurita said politely. His

Japanese was oddly accented, almost archaic. "I am currently second in command to General Davis."

"Why do you fight for these barbarians and not for your House?" Alicia demanded. It offended her sensibilities that a Kurita would serve anyone but the Combine.

"Ah, my apologies, Ambassador, but the House that rules the Combine is not my House," Colonel Kurita replied. He seemed to be picking his words carefully. "While we may claim an ancestor in common, my family's genealogy experts all agree that my line and that of the Combine's House Kurita have been separated since long before the Combine was ever founded. We do not serve the Combine, have never served the Combine, and have no future plans to ever serve the Combine. Doing so would be... highly inappropriate." He smiled at her, as if he knew something that she did not. "You will understand in time, but probably not today."

Alicia was still trying to figure out her supposed distant cousin meaning when she was ushered into the Administrator's office.

"Sir," Colonel Kurita said in English as he led her in. "I present the Draconis Combine ambassador, Sho-sa Alicia Kurita."

"Hello, Ambassador, I am General Davis," greeted the balding man in the GDI uniform. He gave an awkward bow and gestured to the man next to him. The other man was wearing an AFFC uniform, marking him as her enemy; his eyes seemed to widen slightly as they fell upon her. It was a pity that she wasn't allowed to shoot him here. "This is the Federated Suns ambassador, Major Carlos Davion."

"Pleased to meet you, Sho-sa," the Davion man replied. There was something odd in his voice and his manner didn't have the hostility it should have had. Instead of bowing like he should have, he extended his hand.

Alicia stared at the extended hand for a moment. On the one hand, she was insulted that the Davion hadn't bowed to her as basic etiquette demanded. On the other, she had vague recollections of what foreign greetings were supposed to be. Wasn't shaking hands

the barbaric equivalent of bowing?

Alicia tentatively reached out and took the Davion's hand. Instead of shaking it like she expected, the Davion man then bowed over and brought her hand up to his lips. Alicia was so surprised that she didn't jerk her hand back. He kissed the back of her hand and... it tingled pleasantly for some reason.

He straightened back up and released her hand. Alicia flexed it, making sure it was still fully functional despite the unfamiliar sensations.

"It's definitely a pleasure to meet you, Sho-sa," the Davion man said again. "Or I'm sure it will be."

**Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center
Apollo Mission Control Center
Houston, Texas
Earth
April 13th 2007**

The second numbers on the large mission clock slowly counted up, showing the time as everyone in the large room looked at the large dark screens that made up the far wall.

Eugene Francis Kranz stood behind his old console and glanced over the large room. This had been his home for a few years. This room that had made history. He smiled lightly as he glanced over towards the camera crews from CNN, NBC, BBC and whatever TV station had been called to come here today.

Kranz glanced over at the clock for a moment, before pulling at the hem of his white vest, a replica of the one he had worn all those years ago when he had still worked here. His other hand moved to the old headset, making sure it sat correctly and couldn't help but chuckle.

Sure today was an important day, but all this?

The clock switched to 21:07:53 as the sound of radio static came over the large speakers in the walls, followed by a voice.

"We've had a problem, here."

The room erupted in murmurs, as people looked at each other, not knowing that all this was pretty much scripted.

Kranz fingers went to his headset.

"This is Houston, say again please," he said, his voice as calm as it was all those years ago.

"Ahm... Houston, we've had a problem."

The murmurs became louder as the large screens awoke to life, showing the grinning face of two old men, both were dressed in blue jumpsuits

"We're missing Jack up here," the older of the two said.

Kranz couldn't help but chuckle a little.

"Well, his own damned fault that he had to leave before he could have this fun," the younger one shot back.

Kranz smirked and turned towards the cameras.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said into the cameras." Jim Lovell and Fred Haise, at this moment they are..."

His own grin grew wider.

"On the moon."

On the screen Jim frowned a little.

"I bet that NASA is gonna get mails that I don't look anything like Tom Hanks."

Next to him Fred grinned.

"At least I look like a distinguished Bill Paxton."

Jim snorted.

"I guess you will get mails for not looking like Adam Baldwin."

Kranz turned back to the screen.

"Stop it you two," he said with another chuckle." You are where you were supposed to be 37 years ago."

"Hey," Jim noted," not our fault that we had a slight mishap."

"Mishap?" Fred asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Come back to the point, guys," Kranz said. "Aren't you supposed to do something?"

The two former Apollo 13 astronauts looked at each other and grinned.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Fred began.

"With this we proclaim Aquarius Station officially for," Jim continued.

"Opened for business," both finished.

The crowd in Mission Control was stunned, but only for a few moments, before the applause erupted in the room.

"Anything I'm missing up there?" Kranz wondered.

"Naah," Jim said over the applause. "Through I think for a container settlement buried under several feet of lunar regolith its not bad."

Port Krin
Antallos
Periphery
20 November 3021

The Wolfnet Agent had never been to Port Krin before. There had never been a real need before. It was a backwater of the worst sort where criminal and pirate scum got together to trade. There had been little here to interest any of the Successor States and by extension, Wolf's Dragoons.

But then news of what was becoming known as the Battle of Port Krin had spread like wildfire across the Inner Sphere. A battalion sized mech force equipped with lostech from some hitherto unknown Periphery world had seized Port Krin and then proceeded to demolish *several regiments'* worth of battlemechs in a three day running battle. Sure, the destroyed regiments were just pirate scum and bottom of the barrel mercenary units, but even the Dragoons would have been hard pressed to match that kind of performance.

But what had really piqued Wolfnet's interest was the *Timberwolf* seen in one news clip. Close analysis had revealed that it wasn't really a *Timberwolf*; and given the kind of "Frankenmechs" that the Dragoons had seen running around the Inner Sphere, it was probably inevitable that one resembling a Clan Omnimech would show up sooner or later. However, the combination of the "Timberwolf" and reports of advanced technology was irresistible; had one of the other Clans decided to send in their own spy mission?

So the plan was for the Wolfnet Agent to slip in as an anonymous mech technician looking for work. Given that Dragoons were better than the average Spheroid merc, the Agent expected to attract attention soon enough. But he didn't expect it to be right off the Dropship in Customs.

"Your name is Remus Lupin?" the GDI soldier – his nametag read DICKENS - said in disbelief. "For real?"

"Yes, is there a problem?" the Agent replied. Inwardly, he started

cursing himself for his arrogance in picking his alias' name. It wasn't one he used before, but he hadn't expected some Periphery hick to know enough classical literature or Latin to make the connection to wolves. He had barely started his assignment and he may have already blown his cover.

"No, no problem," Dickens replied jovially. "So, I guess I better inspect your wand."

"My what?" the Agent said, nonplussed.

"You wand!" Dickens repeated, barely restrained from laughing. Was he mocking of the Agent? "Every wizard has a wand right?"

"You think I'm a wizard?" the Agent asked slowly, not certain he was hearing this right. "What makes you think that?"

"Because 'Remus Lupin' is so obviously a wizard's name," Dickens explained. "Hey, can you introduce me to Harry Pot..."

"DICKENS!!!" another soldier roared from behind Dickens.

Dickens practically jumped out of his seat to stand at attention. The Agent was rather impressed with the speed of the response and the discipline and training that implied.

"Private Dickens," the other soldier said with lesser volume but a lot more menace. "Kindly explain to me what the hell you think you're doing!"

"Processing new arrivals, Sergeant!" Dickens replied crisply.

"Which you will continue to do with complete professionalism and courtesy," the GDI Sergeant told him. "That includes NOT making fun of people because they have a familiar sounding name, or else I'll have you up on charges so fast that your head will spin. Are we clear, Private?"

"Clear, Sergeant!" Dickens replied.

"Good. Now get back to work," the Sergeant ordered. He turned and nodded to the Agent. "Sorry for delay, sir."

After that, the interview went much more smoothly. It was a fairly basic "Why are you here?" and "Do you have anything to declare?" question and answer session that went quickly. Interestingly, Dickens appeared to enter the data into a computer terminal that seemed a bit sophisticated for a lowly Periphery backwater Private to be operating. Even more interesting, the Sergeant remained hovering in the background to make sure that Dickens stayed polite. These people valued not offending nobodies like what the Agent was posing as; he wasn't certain what that signified, but he filed it away in his mental notebook.

As the Agent walked away after the interview, the next passenger off the Dropship he had arrived in took his place. The kid was so fresh off the farm that he practically still had hayseed in his hair.

"I'm Guybrush Threepwood," the kid declared, "Mighty Pirate!"

* * *

"Ambassador, welcome to Port Krin," General Davis said in greeting to the person who had officially been designated as Earth's representative to the universe at large.

"Thank you, General," Ambassador Charles Smith replied. He was a British national although Davis understood his staff had members from all the major nations, kind of like Davis' own staff.

"How was your trip?"

"Surprisingly fast given everything I've heard about how slow jumpship travel is," Smith answered.

"That's why GDI command decided on setting up a command circuit between here and Earth," Davis told him. "It shortens message turn around time from four months down to a week and can get Dropships across two hundred plus lightyears in a day. Of course, if we ever need reinforcements in a hurry, they'd have to be squeezed into three

Dropships at two week intervals."

"Is that bad?" Smith asked, concerned.

"Sir, if we really need reinforcements that badly, then three Dropships' worth isn't going to be enough unless we use the Mules in which case we might as well paint giant bull's eyes on them," Davis answered half jokingly. "Not that it matters anyway. We probably wouldn't last the week anyway."

"Are you saying we should pull out?" Smith asked concerned.

"Not at all, Ambassador," Davis reassured him. "I'm just giving you the worst case scenario. Besides which, the longer we can stockpile supplies here, the longer we can hold out against any attacker. Intel says that the force level required to evict us is so large now that it any of our most likely opponents would have to severely weaken themselves on other fronts to get the necessary numbers to do so."

"Well, that's certainly a relief," Smith said. "The reports we received back home were rather alarming."

"You have no idea, sir," Davis sighed. "It was a close run thing, but we won and things have been pretty calm since. There have been a few incidents between salvage teams and desert bandits, but nothing the teams couldn't handle."

"I see," Smith said. He ruminated for a moment then spoke again. "There is one thing in some of the follow up reports that are... well, unbelievable."

"Such as?"

"There seems to be a large preponderance of fictional characters running around in real life," Smith said. "It has some people back home doubting your people's sanity."

"Honestly, Ambassador, you could say that about the whole Inner Sphere," Davis replied. "I have trouble believing it myself at times, but I can confirm that these people exist. For example, there's a small

plumbing business here in Port Krin run by a pair of brothers name 'Mario' and 'Luigi' who also happen to own a pet that's a turtle-like alien critter called a 'Goomba', a mercenary group calling itself the 'A Team' landed the other day looking for work, and I personally gave an interview to a reporter named 'Lois Lane' who happens to have a cameraman name Jimmy Olson. And as near as anyone can tell, they're all exactly who they say they are."

* * *

The mech standing in Bob's Used Mechs and Salvage yard was not a design that the Agent had ever seen before. It vaguely resembled a *Warhammer*, but there were enough differences to make it a completely different design. It was old and battered and shot up and had big gaping hole where the Agent estimated the head ought to be.

"Pretty, ain't she? Pity she's not for sale," a man asked as he walked up. At the Agent's inquisitive look, the man introduced himself. "I'm Bob, proprietor of this fine establishment."

"Remus Lupin," the Agent replied. "I'm not here to buy, though. I was told that this is where I could get some work. I'm a tech."

"Lupin, Lupin..." Bob repeated to himself. "Oh, right, they told me you might be coming. Yeah, I could use a few genuine techs, show these ex-slaves how to properly salvage mech parts." He gestured at a group of workers in the distance working on some wrecks. "If I have to pay them wages, I'd at least like them to do a good job," he added in disgust.

"I'm sure I can show them a few things," the Agent said, not letting any of his real feelings show. "What do you mean 'ex-slaves'?"

"It's these new guys in charge," Bob answered. "They're real uptight and high and mighty, you know. They've banned slavery and now we have to pay workers a decent wage to live on if you can believe it. If it weren't for all the salvage business they were throwing my way, I might have objected."

"Salvage business?" the Agent asked. "It's been more than four months

since the Battle of Port Krin. Are they still salvaging mechs from that?"

"Not 'they'. WE are doing the salvaging," Bob corrected. "Four months ago, I barely made ends trading in gear and salvage. Then these GDI or Third Earthers or whatever they're calling themselves come along and hire – draft was more like it - just about everyone with technical knowhow to clean up the mess they made."

"And you're still cleaning up the battlefield?"

"Nah, we got that done in the first month," Bob told him. "These days, GDI hands me a map, tells us to 'Dig Here', and then assigns a mech lance or two to make sure we're uninterrupted. And almost every damn time, there's something to be found. I dunno how they do it."

"Maybe they have an old map of cache sites?" the Agent suggested.

"You'd think so, but most of what we dig up were obvious battle losses," Bob said. "They died where we found them and ain't no one made any maps of that. This baby" he waved at the unidentified mech that the Agent had been studying "was buried under *five meters* of sand."

"Er, what is it, anyway?" the Agent asked, as he began wondering how good GDI scanners were. They couldn't possibly see through solid rock, right? "I thought I knew every mech used in the Inner Sphere, but I don't recognize this one."

"That, Remus, is a genuine *Hammerhands*," Bob said in disgust. "It's an antique dating from the Age of War. God knows what it's doing on Antallos, and I could have made a mint off selling it to some rich collector in the Inner Sphere. But GDI gets first dibs on anything we find and they're only really interested in lostech or just anything 'interesting' like a rare *Hammerhands*. And they're only paying retail, the cheapskates!"

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Municipal Works Quarterly

Reengineering Antallos by Charles Balik

An exclusive interview with Nicholas Hudak

Nicholas Hudak was the civic engineer selected to head up the GDI infrastructure reconstruction effort at Port Krin. He holds a bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering and has over 25 years of practical experience. MWQ was fortunate enough to garner some of his valuable time back on Earth for this interview.



This panorama shows the edge of the Vallisa floodplain south of Krin. The digger in the background is a Caterpillar-325D

MWQ: Why do you feel you were selected for this gargantuan task?

You know, there isn't a single day that goes by where I don't ask myself that very question. I suppose the reason a civilian was chosen

was due to the fact that GDI was under pressure to turn over as much of the Port Krin operation as possible to non-military management. So someone from the Army Corp of engineers was considered politically unacceptable. They then turned to FEMA and their international equivalents for possible candidates. I had worked as a civil engineer in Los Angeles, Kansas City, and Minneapolis, probably three of the most disaster prone cities in the US. I guess that I had acquired a reputation for being able to improvise, and quickly get broken infrastructure running again with a minimum of resources. I had also done volunteer work in South America, so the government felt it would be less of a culture clash for me.

MWQ: Were they right? About your experience in the third world that is.

I wish. You do nine months work in Bolivia out of college and you get declared a "Developing world negotiation specialist". Guess I can only blame myself for putting it on my resume when I was job hunting.

MWQ: Can you describe the trip to Antallos? What it was like to travel on a jump ship?

Let me put it this way: imagine being shoved into a small steel box with one thousand other people. And there are no windows. And you will be in there for two months. That's a fairly good description of what it was like back then. The conditions were very tight, every single square inch of the dropship was crammed full of men, and cargo pallets. You have to remember that back in '06, the military force to Antallos had taken severe casualties. The next convoy of ships was full of relief forces. I was on the second group to head out, and was probably one of only a dozen civilians in the entire jump fleet. Vehicles and munitions had taken up almost all the cargo space. The reconstruction bureau had only been allocated enough space for one person and two cargo pallets on that run.

MWQ: What was the reconstruction bureau's goal with such a limited amount of resources?

Our primary goal was to restore vital municipal services that had been damaged by the war. Water, gas, roads, power, sewage and the

like. This was to be achieved using primarily local labor and resources. As the supply situation improved we were to try and bring the city infrastructure up to western standards. That part of the plan is still ongoing, but with luck should be completed within the next three years.

MWQ: Can you please explain in depth how your primary task was achieved?

Sure. I'll try and give you a condensed version of it though so we aren't here all day.

As the dropship landed I managed to get my first look at the city. The entire city is laid out on a coastal flat with the better part of town located to the east on the bluffs, and the spaceport to the south. The place looked like a bombed out husk, the walls along the western side of the city completely blown apart, along with the surrounding neighborhoods. Large yellow gashes were torn across entire city blocks where artillery fire or mechs had landed. The dark strips of road looked like the arteries of a dying animal, exposed and vulnerable to the world. The southern section was in far better shape, along with the main trade and industrial districts. Still, you couldn't help but wonder how much of the destruction had been caused by the war with the border cities, and how much by three hundred years of neglect.



Much of the population of Antallos lives in slums such as this one in the Settlers zone. Port Krin is ranked as a medium developed country on the HDI, with a ranking of 134. Per capita income is US\$ 4,130. However, the future looks bright with an estimated 9% economic growth each year, and a growing presence by Earth companies

I wasn't working completely by myself, thank god. I was assigned a corporal Llanos from the Argentinean detachment as a bodyguard.

Back then the whole city was in a state of anarchy, and they didn't want any civilians out by themselves. I'd learned Spanish working in Bolivia, and when I struck up a conversation with him, I learned that he had been going to college, studying to be a structural engineer before being conscripted after the ZL affair. He was an absolute godsend. As the situation cooled down, I was able to have him train the heads of the new work gangs while I was working on the initial surveying.

MWQ: Work gangs?

Antallos is a city of one point two million, many of whom were out of work. We started hiring men, dividing them into groups of about fifty. The smartest ones we selected as group leaders. They would be trained in the basics, and then they would train their own men. Most of the work was fairly simple at first, clearing debris to get to the guts of the city. As it turned out there was little infrastructure to actually repair, so we had to start from scratch. Most of the roads in the city were gravel or cobble, two of the worst road types ever devised by man. There were ferrocrete block roadbeds in the better sections of town and those were fairly easy to patch.

MWQ: What happened to the rest of the original ferrocrete roads?

They had been ripped from the ground and used to build up the city walls during the Succession Wars. We thought about laying down new ferrocrete, but Port Krin has only a small processing plant on the outskirts that could produce the stuff and all of their production had been requisitioned by the military to build fortifications.

On lesser used roads and residential streets we laid down macadam. The crews would rip out the old bed, and go down about eight inches. A layer of sand half an inch thick would go down. Then a layer of crushed stones about four inches in diameter. Then a three-ton roller would compress it. Another layer of sand, a layer of two inch rocks, then compress. Another layer of sand, a layer of rocks around one inch thick, and layer of coarse sand one inch thick. Finally it would be wet down and a seven-ton roller would compress it until a three and a half-ton cart or truck could pass over it without leaving a mark.

Did you know that it takes fourteen hundred pounds of raw material to do one days work by a single crew? I sure didn't and there were almost no military cargo trucks free to assist with obtaining material. We put the word out that we would pay good money for crushed rocks of roughly uniform size and bulk amounts of sand. The free market went to work, and the next thing you know there were dozens of suppliers that had appeared overnight. Every joe with a free wagon had stuck a sign to the side of it and started hauling. It was an amazing thing to see. Each day hundreds of carts and trucks would start making the run to newly established quarries outside the city. Of course, the quarry rock had to be tested first in a rattler to make sure it was of good quality.

MWQ: Why not use asphalt instead of macadam?

We did use asphalt on the main thoroughfares and roads in the industrial/commercial district. The macadam streets were always intended as a temporary solution. Most of them should be replaced by asphalt within the next eight years once the macadam seasons, though we do have crews that repair and re-roll the sections that still exist.

We bought the rights to an asphalt lake twenty-five miles outside of town and started transporting the stuff back to Port Krin. Almost everything had to be done by hand, there were no asphalt laying machines. Once the bed had been prepared by laying out a strip of concrete, a barrel of asphalt would be heated over a fire, and then have sand and limestone added. The stuff would be mixed and then applied to the bed hot and spread out with boards. Finally a seven-ton roller would level it out. These were the first modern roads the city had seen in almost one hundred years.



A road crew working under the watchful eyes of GDI troops.



One of many new GDI reconstruction employees sits back for a moments rest.

MWQ: Were there any bright spots?

Actually there was. When the Star League founded the city it had

installed the water supply system, and amazingly it had survived fully intact for over three hundred years. The descendants of the last shift assigned to it were still maintaining the system, handing down the necessary skills and equipment from generation to generation. The water is brought in via a system of four water pipes that go all the way to the Musconet River system four hundred and eighty miles to the south. The sheer size of the system is staggering. The maximum water capacity of the system is over five-point eight billion gallons of water each day. That is more than the entire New York Metro area consumes.

MWQ: I thought that the majority of groundwater on Antallos was heavily polluted?

The SL also installed vast banks of Slow Sand Filters. Though I must say that calling them that is grossly understating their effectiveness. I would have to say that they must be at least twice as effective as our own filtration systems. I spoke to Absalom Woods (he is the head of the water department there) and he says that in addition to using volcanic sand, the filter beds use a genetically modified film layer. Assuming that we can get the bacteria to reproduce in large numbers, then we could see a potential revolution in how potable water is processed, with drastically lower filtration costs, and greater reliability.

Woods is a good man, he has kept the water supply of Krin operating through war, famine, and a complete lack of exterior assistance. I recommend in my report that he be placed in charge of public services after my reassignment four years from now. The size of the water operation is staggering. The main pipelines run for almost two thousand miles altogether. I was fortunate enough to accompany Woods on a monthly maintenance expedition. And yes, it truly was an expedition, with four hundred men and eighty vehicles! The vast majority of them were trucks that had been turned into improvised APC's and mounted machine guns, and even flame-throwers. But I do remember asking Woods about the tanks.

MWQ: Tanks?

They must have had at least twelve of those hovertanks, I think they

called them Condors. When I asked why they were needed, he laughed and said that the only way we would make it to the other end of the aqueduct without a heavy escort was if we swam up it. And there were even more men stationed at each pumping station. Now that I think about it, with the PQ forces disbanded after we came in, the water department was the most heavily armed native force in the city. Funny, isn't it.

Getting back to the pipeline, it took us a week to make it to the end. Each of the pumps was housed in a pyramidal ferrocrete bunker that must have risen at least three hundred feet above the dunes, and reached twice as far below them. All were still working perfectly as it turned out. Each pumping station was also splitter station, with closed valves for outflow pipes going off into the desert. I have a wild theory. When the SL built the pipeline, I think it was intended to be far more than a city aqueduct. I believe that each of the pumping stations were also built as feeder valves for a vast desert irrigation project. At a later date, they could add outflow pipes to each station and begin to expand the irrigated zone as the local population increased. I estimate that the potential ground that could be covered by the completed system would cover ninety-five thousand square miles. What I wouldn't give to see it completed, to have the desert bloom. Unfortunately it's unlikely that I'll ever see it done within my lifetime, or even yours for that matter. Penny-pinching bureaucrats. But in a small way we did manage to start the Star Leagues plan.

MWQ: When you say that you were able start the plan what do you mean?

The city sewage was getting dumped straight into the Sea of Talisea. Of course from a sanitation perspective, that just could not do. If there was one thing that Marc Danzon (that's the WHO rep there) kept pounding into my skull, it was that with almost no medical infrastructure existing, the main way to prevent disease was to keep the place clean. He said that replacing the street surfaces with asphalt, which can be easily cleaned, was good start but there was much more to do. The sewers themselves were fine once we cleared out the flush tanks, but there was no processing plant.

We came up with a rather clever solution, one that could be done

with a minimum of machinery or chemicals. Ever heard of broad sewer irrigation? No? It used to be a popular system of sewage disposal back in the early nineteen hundreds. You use a crude mechanical separator, little more than a clam grate to remove most of the solids. These are compressed and shipped out of town for disposal. Then you run what's left out into the countryside via a cut channel and use it to irrigate fields for farming. We were even able to lease the fields to the locals to help pay for the labor costs.

Sorry for wandering I'll try to get back to the aqueduct. When we finally reached the headwaters valve complex, I was told that I was lucky to have chosen this month to come out there. Apparently they were going to start cleaning Tunnel No. Three. Now, let me tell you, I've seen pluggers used to clean water mains before, but never on this scale. Each pig was nearly the size of a TBM, thirty feet around and two hundred feet long. They were based on what looked like a modified Pressure-hybrid scraper design. When I said to Wood there was no way you could pig a tunnel that wide, that the weight of the machine would create too much drag to be effectively pushed by water pressure, he explained the secret. Each plug has a fusion reactor powering a set of rails along the side. The rails have a set of electric magnets, which push against another set integrated into the wall of the tunnel. This cancels the weight, and allows the water to push it along at a serene three miles an hour.

MWQ: Had the local water department been able to clean and repair the in-town water mains?

Unfortunately no. Construction or vandalism had severed some water pipes and entire streets had their water supply gated, and the inhabitants had to use public waterspouts. A great deal of sediment had also accumulated in the system, no doubt partly due to the new dead pipes that lacked double flow. Since we were ripping up the roads already, we found it to be a relatively simple matter to lay down new piping and to clean the preexisting ones. We'd have a crew set the gates at both ends of a street to the off position, and open the inspection valves. The methods used were pretty crude, for the most part we used cast iron plugs, hauled up and down the pipes by chains. The plugs had grooves cut into them so they would move down the pipe in a spiral, scouring all the debris out and had a

gunnysack filled with shavings behind them.

MWQ: Where did you manage to obtain the necessary materials to lay new pipe?

I was able to track down a company near the spaceport called the Moore & Terrell Casting Company. They specialized in doing iron casting. It was a pretty primitive affair, they were still using one-shot sand molds, for crying out loud! But they were able to sell us all the pipe sections we needed, though it took them a while to ramp up production. They hadn't had such a large order since the days of Controller Blackmoore. Most of the smaller equipment like valve gates was ordered from dozens of small machine shops. The vast majority of industry in Krin, probably the entire planet, was done in small family workshops. It was a bit like Japan before World War Two. You can't believe the kind of hassle it was, trying to deal with so many manufacturers and suppliers. We tried to encourage some of the more reliable ones to merge, but then we ran into problems with the burokrata.

MWQ: Do you mean bureaucrats?

Yes I do. You know, in the news they try to cast Port Krin as a place of complete lawlessness, a 'hive of scum' and all that. Don't believe them for a minute, the local government had a truly immense maze of red tape, and public agencies. You couldn't transfer land ownership without a deed to it, and to get a deed meant filling out a stack of paperwork five-foot tall in triplicate and paying more fees than the land was worth. You could not conduct business without being a resident of Krin or getting an external trader licensee. All at a hefty fee of course. If you want to merge companies, you'd either have to wait six years for paperwork to go through, or pay the bureaucrats a large bribe. If a single, homogeneous political block existed in the city, it was the bureaucracy. And in our attempts to encourage our suppliers to grow, we had walked right into them.

They were arrogant, and with good reason. Dictators and armies would rise and fall, but they remained. They saw us as being no different from any other conquerors, and were sure that no matter what, they could still run things their way. What happened next

wasn't pretty, I'm the first to admit that. What the interim military government did was the complete obliteration of the government class. The bureaucrats were purged from the city apparatus, and new personnel hired, many with no experience with their new jobs. We had police who used to be miners and were given two days training before being sent to the streets. There were block health inspectors who believed the miasma theory. It took months before these people were either replaced with competent personnel, or they had gained enough skill to do their jobs properly. It was a bad time, but we had little choice but to hope for the best.

MWQ: Aside from the water department, was there any other competent city services?

Not really. The PQ's wouldn't tell you the time of day unless you greased their palms with a few C-Bills. The neighborhood guards were okay but there were only two a neighborhood and they tend to be disabled war veterans. Their job is to act as a combination neighborhood watch and fire crew. If they spot trouble, it's their job to raise the alarm and to gather and organize volunteers. They tended to stay out of the way of most of the criminals they were supposed to watching for, but they were somewhat better at battling fires. With most of the town a tinderbox waiting to be set off, it's a good thing, too. About four months after I'd arrived, a large fire started in one of the worst slums to the north. Seven square blocks raised to the ground, and almost three hundred dead. And all from a leaking gas main.



Sewer farm #D272. Farms such as this process the 24 million cubic feet of sewage generated by Port Krin each day.



New construction is a common sight in Port Krin. This building is the future headquarters of the Shaanxi-Dasheng Chemical Company.



Many of the buildings in the city were built with no central oversight. Peeling back layers of structures to gain access to Star League era infrastructure has proven to be a mammoth task.

MWQ: There were natural gas fields on Antallos? Those were being tapped for city use?

There were at Port Krin in any case. The original city fusion reactor was destroyed during the Secession Wars. The city only had a handful of small backup and emergency reactors left. So aside from the upper classes and some of the more prosperous companies, no one had electricity. So a natural gas system was laid down after the SL left, and was consequently as well built as one would expect. Most of it just lay on the ground exposed, with homes just feeding straight off of it. When we did survey work in the settler's zone, we found that only twenty three percent of homes had electricity. The majority of the population relied on gas for lighting, heating, and cooking. The major industries had electrical generators that ran off the gas, but they were too large and expensive for regular use. It was decided that it would be cheaper to bring in a nuclear reactor from home and start wiring the city then to repair the old gas lines. That project is still ongoing, and the increased power load from all the new construction and industry going up means that they are going to send another reactor out this month.

MWQ: What would you say is your overall impression is?

I'd have to say that I'm content. We did what no one thought could be done, and without tearing down the whole city. By the standards of the planet, there were very few construction fatalities thanks to new safety rules and equipment we introduced. And we built a solid base for the major urban center that Krin is bound to become. I just hope to God that we will be as successful next time.

City Hall
Port Krin
Antallos
November 27th 2007/3022

Colonel Jefferson Michaels looked over to a pair of techs working on their laptops and than glanced over towards the door to the Main Hall of Port Krin City Hall.

He shook his head. Out there was just about everyone from the city's bureaucracy. All those office drones that thought they could just keep going with all that red tape they had erected to run this city. Heck there were more bureaucrats in this city than in any city on Earth of similar size.

Again his glance wandered through the room, towards the three large racks in one corner, containing a larger number of IBM servers that had arrived from Earth four month ago, with a number of techs from IBM and SAP, and about fifty people who knew how to do corporate takeovers and how to organize a government. Hell, about twenty of them had helped out the Chinese reorganize their government.

"And... done," Thorsten Meiler, one of the SAP techs, said with a grinned. "That completes the transfer of the city's databases into a format we can work with."

Michaels grinned and reached for his radio, briefly wondering how long it would take to set up a cellphone network. Well, Vodaphone had already sent some people.

"This is Michaels," he said." Status of Main Hall?"

There was a short pause.

"Packed to the brim, sir," was the answer.

"Status of the other halls?" he asked, referring to a number of other halls that had been set up, as not everyone in the cities bureaucracy could to fit in the Main Hall." Status of the office sweeps?"

"Hall One through Four note that they are also filled to the last place. Office sweeps are finished. Save for the guys from the Water Department, everyone is here."

"Good," he said, putting the radio into his pocket and looking at the three large servers again.

"Are you sure that we're able to take over the city's operations if some disgruntled office drones should take out the Main Frame?"

"Absolutely, sir," Dave Thomas from IBM noted. "And even if they get in here, we still have a real time mirror of our servers back at GDI headquarters."

Michaels chuckled. It had been a good idea to place a fiber optic cable under the streets from City Hall to GDI headquarters after running straight into the city government. He doubted that any of these inept bureaucrats knew that they had confiscated this room and placed guards in front of it to make a backup of the database in the City mainframe, after MacGyvering an interface to the mainframe.

From what Michaels had understood, the techs had been very surprised to find a communication technology reminiscent of the ARPANET.

"Then its Corporate Takeover Time," Michaels said with a grin and walked towards the door.

Who, in any military of the world, could say that he didn't want to disband the bureaucracy?

All noise in the Main Hall stopped as Michaels stepped up to the podium in the front and glanced over the the cameras that projected his image into the other four halls. A sweep over the people in the hall showed him that, yes, the bigwigs in this local bureaucracy were standing in the front, very obviously peeved that they had to stand and that they had to be here.

"Ladies, Gentlemen," he said. "A few of you will know me. I am Colonel Jefferson Michaels of GDI and was placed in charge of the operation to ensure that this city has a competent government."

Of course those bigwigs up front grinned in an arrogant and self-assured way, certain they would get some praise from him in front of everyone else.

"The great Frank Herbert once said, 'Bureaucracy destroys initiative. There is little that bureaucrats hate more than innovation, especially innovation that produces better results than the old routines. Improvements always make those at the top of the heap look inept.'"

He stopped for a moment, allowing the people in Main Hall to look at him strangely, especially the bigwigs.

"In the last few months, I've found out that you all do just that. You hate innovation. You are so full of yourselves about managing this little heap called a city that you became arrogant. For you we are nothing more than any other invader and conqueror."

"That may be the case. But one thing is for sure. We will take the initiative and present innovation to this city and this planet."

He smirked and noted that the bigwigs were getting riled up about everything he had said and the guards in the room made sure that everyone saw their weapons.

"I will do everyone on every world and in every nation has always dreamed of doing. I will tell you this..."

Again he stopped as everyone looked at him.

"You are all fired. Get your stuff from your offices and leave in the next two hours. I want to see all governmental buildings empty when those two hours are over. If not, I will send in my people."

Not even listening to the protests, he entered the back room again. Closing the door behind him, his grin widened and he began to laugh at the memory of all those faces.

GDI Headquarters
Port Krin
Antallos
August 11 2006/3021

"Lieutenant Dansel reporting as ordered sir." With so many officers incapacitated or killed by the fighting, the lieutenant found himself reporting directly to the Expeditionary Force Commander.

General Davis returned the lieutenant's salute, and said "Take a seat son. Now that we've dealt with the immediate crisis, we need to get to work on surviving the long haul. We can't expect any reinforcements from home for upwards of four months, so we're going to have to present the strongest face we can with what we've got. Your thoughts?"

"Sir, careful employment of captured personnel and equipment to increase our forces would seem to be our only option at this point, especially if we're going to maintain the visible Battlemech strength that will be taken seriously as a deterrent."

"Spot on lieutenant. Congratulations, since you managed to keep your last three charges in line and pointed at the enemy you're getting an increase in responsibility."

"A company command slot sir?" Rumors to that effect had been circulating through the Expeditionary Force, and Dansel had just about resigned himself to that fate.

"Son, I wish we had enough healthy mech qualified officers that I could get away with only giving you a company. Charlie's going to being upped to at least a battalion over time, and apart from your command lance, all of your personnel are going to be folks we captured here. They won't be getting any electronics upgrades, and we're going to be shoving them out in front if there's an attack, because we damned sure won't be able to trust them at our backs."

Dansel considered this horrifying prospect for a moment "So, you're putting me in charge of the GDI foreign legion, and the hope is that

the fact that they already seem to think I'm an undying spirit of vengeance will keep them from pushing their luck. I think I can work with that."

"Outstanding. One other thing, I've talked to your last two COs, and I wanted to get your inevitable attempt to weasel out of a medal over with as soon as possible."

"Sir, I'd like to think that I've grown up a bit in the last year. As long as you keep it within the bounds of reason, I'll keep my trap shut this time."

Mech Hangar
Port Krin
Antallos
August 12 2006/3021

Captain Vbranch had never been more certain that she was going to die. Even when in combat, out of ammo, and shut down from overheating, there had still been the thought that one of her troops might choose to bail her out. Right now though, all of them were strung out behind her, and if anything in even worse shape since none of them ran for fun.

After a few minutes of stretching the session of applied sadism had begun with a simple overhand clap. What sounded like a joke of an exercise soon became painful as they broke the hundred mark, then torture at the three hundred mark, then an unending nightmare of agony somewhere around five hundred. From there, they had progressed to other exercises, culminating in the current run around the hangar. All the while, the little bastard at the front had effortlessly kept going, and while most of the other Motherloaders looked more haggard, they were in far better shape than the Antallans.

"All you have to do to finish is climb to the rear hatch of the

Hunchback after a dozen laps" She had lost track of how many laps after twenty she was on, but every time there's been an open spot on the Hunchback for her to attempt the climb, she simply hadn't been able to maintain a grip. As she came around again and psyched herself for another attempt, she caught sight of their new commander, running next to some short scarred man she didn't know. As she saw the weaselly looking bastard palm a blade, she tried to shout a warning, but simply couldn't get out more than a gasping croak.

Without looking Dansel, standing six foot two and 230 pounds despite rigorous exercise and the constant sauna of a mech cockpit, simply body checked his attacker off of his feet, calmly stepping on the man's knife hand as he came to a halt. Raising his voice to fill the hangar, he shouted "Really?! This is the standard for assassinations I can expect? I've been jumped by fucking children who could set up a better surprise attack than that! Get to the showers and chow, and at least fucking make it *interesting* next time! I'm going to have a little chat with this son of a bitch, formation in front of the barracks at 1000 hours!"

After all of the draftees had left the hangar in a state of dazed shock, Dansel helped the man to his feet "Nicely played Rovira. Get that make-up washed off and report back to your unit tomorrow morning." He reflected that finding a pair of identical twin fitness freaks to trade off leading the exercises might have been slightly unfair. Then he dismissed the thought, since it wasn't like he'd inflicted Brox's idea of an exercise regimen on them.

Foreign Legion Barracks
Port Krin
Antallos
August 16 2006/3021

The sound of shouting and crashing had come from Dansel's quarters for quite some time, interspersed with snarling and barking. Vbranch had sent a runner to the Headquarters, and was nerving herself up to

try to open the door as the rest of the unit watched. She was just reaching for the doorknob when the door was flung open.

Tony Dansel poked his head out. He was covered in sweat, with a split lip, and his shirt torn in several places. "Vranch!"

"Yes milord!" Her brain shocked into paralysis, she gave the reflexive response of years of feudal service.

"There's a vicious bloodthirsty attack dog in my quarters!"

"Yes milord?"

"Next time make it a *big* one!" He slammed the door, and went back to playing with the quite inappropriately named 'Boo-boo'. It had taken some time for an appropriately gentle cross between a mutt and a Demolisher Tank to be found, but even friendly play with something his size could be fairly hazardous. The main difficulty when walking him would be forcefully restraining him from leaping on people and destroying his reputation as a slavering beast by licking them to death.

Foreign Legion Barracks

Port Krin

Antallos

August 19 2006/3021

"Mail Call!"

"What do you have for me today sergeant?" Dansel asked eagerly.

"Two poisoning attempts, three bombs, and some really horrible love poems sir" An explosion echoed from inside the building "... make that four bombs."

"See if you can track down the senders, and forward any information

to Lewis's mob." While actively trying to purge all of the various criminals in Port Krin could start a general uprising, retaliation attacks were commonly accepted practice. Of course, if anyone figured out that the supposedly guilty parties had been framed, then their rivals would find that the evidence pointed straight at them.

Briefing Room
Avalon City
New Avalon
Crucis March, Federated Suns
August 30, 2006/3021

Following a single explosion between the two opposing groups of mechs, Field Marshal Yvonne Davion killed the holo. "Marshal Riffenberg managed to free up a Boomerang to observe the last major action of the battle, but it was out of position to observe precisely what happened to the flanking force moving to the support of the remaining city-state forces. This briefing has been compiled essentially from information in the public domain. Major Davion managed to obliquely hint that GDI is giving the impression that there is an issue with communications security between Antallos and New Avalon."

Intelligence chief Quintus Allard piped in "Because of the general uproar, our covert personnel will be utilizing courier chains to submit their reports, rather than traipsing into the Comstar station to draw attention. Our known agents' reports deliberately have little to add to Riffenberg or Davion's observations. As per your instructions to smooth alliance talks with the Archon, one of our people there is seconding his transmitted reports to the Steiner chief of station. Marshal Riffenberg deliberately kept his unit in the immediate area, ostensibly to make punitive strikes against pirate groups, so he was able to receive a packet from one of my MIIO ships, and send it back down the command circuit we'd established to get the Light Guards to Antallos in time. A large portion of the information is so unbelievable that I feel the need for corroboration before any action is taken, as the most likely explanation would seem to be a deliberate deception scheme. One common thread however, is a general distrust for the security of our communications and Comstar's supposed

neutrality in general. Since nearly the only way for Ryan to have even heard of Motherlode in time to make the journey when he did short of a personally addressed priority signal is direct Comstar assistance, I feel that this fits well with the larger pattern of concerns that have arisen regarding the organization. The fact that possibly the most notoriously destructive bandit known to the Inner Sphere was in all probability deliberately targeted on a previously unknown source of advanced technology is also extremely troubling when you tie it to the supposedly random pattern of technical destruction over the last century."

Hanse Davion drew in a deep breath "Quintus make all efforts to completely separate your operations from dependence on Comstar, and increase your coverage of NAIS as much as you deem practical. Yvonne, what potential threat do these people pose, and if they turn hostile, how much will it take to eliminate them?"

"Offensively, we believe that they stretched themselves to the limit to project what we're calling a Battalion Combat Team from Motherlode to Antallos, based on their reduced use of lostech munitions as the battle dragged on. While they would be able to crush any of our worlds out towards the periphery on the ground, they have next to no observed space based fighting capability. As such the aerospace assets of a single Regimental Combat Team, especially if augmented by assault dropships, would be able to burn them out of space if we managed to anticipate their target to get forces into position, and even the local defenses would be able to cost them greatly. Defensively, I'm not certain that we *could* project enough force out that far to shift them, at least without critically weakening ourselves in critical areas and inviting attack by Kurita or Liao."

Hanse leaned back in his chair, and said "Explain", wanting to see if her thoughts on the matter tracked with his own.

"Conventional military wisdom has it that a three to one numerical superiority is sufficient to defeat a defending force without the attackers incurring significant losses. We saw in the first battle that this GDI was able to eliminate nearly three times their mech forces in an incredibly short time, and at least as much force again over the course of the next two days. Within the next few months, barring

technological miracles they will have repaired roughly half of the forces they destroyed, bringing them up to reinforced regimental status. At the same time, their flotilla will almost certainly have completed a round trip to bring reinforcements and additional supplies. Our report from Major Davion indicates that with the addition of Ryan's dropships and the ones they captured in port, they were able to replace all of the Leopards they brought with Buccaneers, Unions, and Mules for their first trip back. So, in the near future they will likely have massively increased numbers, with far more munitions than they expended effectively wiping out two mech regiments." She paused for a second, staring off into the distance, before calling up the holographic display and rapidly highlighting units as she resumed speaking. "However, if you give the order right now, I believe we could eliminate them before they could receive reinforcements. If we use the command circuit established for the Light Guards to move a force into theater each week, we should be able to rush roughly four regimental combat teams to within one jump of Antallos, drawing from our reserves in the Crucis March, and using the jumpships of the individual units to replace the first link of the circuit. If we can reinsert Quintus's spy ship into the system, they would be able to jump back out to warn our force if GDI's reinforcements arrived early. We've seen from the reports of the fighting that they had more trouble with aerospace fighters than anything else, and even if they were holding more of their lostech in reserve, we would be throwing more than a hundred and fifty fighters at them, along with six hundred Battlemechs and massed armored and infantry support."

Ardan Sortek, who had been silent until this point interrupted, saying "However, if we do that, we would be driving them straight into the arms of the Draconis Combine, while if we wait, it is nearly certain that even if Takashi takes no official action, one of his Warlords will slip his leash and make his own independent attack. Hasek would use an action in the far reaches of the Periphery as leverage to act against you claiming that you don't care about you people who are on the border of major threats, and Duke Sandoval would side with him, increasing the domestic pressure on you. And if the way they fought on Antallos is any indication, even if you could find their home world, trying to take it would result in the destruction of anything worth gaining. If Quintus is right about Comstar, you'd be doing their

work for them."

Hanse smiled slightly, and said "Don't worry old friend, I can hear the argument you're afraid I don't want to listen to, and I agree. If we just randomly start attacking neutral parties we wouldn't be any better than Liao or Kurita. Yvonne, create a compartment to look at the possibility of duplicating that deployment technique in the event that we need to make a deep strike against one of our enemies. Quintus, what new intelligence do you have that you are willing to accept at face value at this time?"

"It seems that GDI doesn't hesitate to enlist mercenaries that have been hired to attack it. Most interestingly we have Aladdin Al Azim, an Azami expatriate and rebel against the Draconis Combine, now apparently the commander of GDI's mech forces. The Fire Brands were essentially your standard hard-luck outfit existing on the verge of collapse before Vorax recruited them to attack Motherlode, and we have positively identified their commanding officer and all of their mechs as part of GDI's mech battalion. More interestingly, we have the Buron Cavalry. All indications point to Vorax deliberately entrapping them to force their participation, and they seem to be fairly trusted, as Major Staedale seems to be leading the second battalion of their expanded force."

Hanse held up his hand to signal Quintus to stop "The Buron Cavalry. Aren't they the reason the 21st Galedon Regulars are still attempting to rebuild? Why exactly didn't we make provisions to retain them?"

"The official responsible for handling them seems to have made a bungled effort to pressure them into staying on poor terms."

Calling up the file and scanning the details, the First Prince said with increasing heat "A unit accomplishes all of its objectives, and shatters an entire battalion of Kuritan regulars at grave cost to itself, and this is how we repay them? Did this thundering imbecile not realize that a third of our mech forces are mercenaries, which will now expect us to use them up and cast them aside?"

"Sire I fear that the next item we have learned isn't going to help your blood pressure at all. A Captain Burgess Hale, formerly a member of

the AFFS, has also been confirmed as being a current member of GDI. Looking into his file, it seems that his court-martial was more than slightly irregular, and that his family died under mysterious circumstances at the same time. The official responsible for handling the Buron Cavalry also seems to have acquired all of their assets apart from the Hale family mech, which Hale managed to escape with."

"You seem to be avoiding telling me the name of the official Quintus. It's a Davion isn't it?" At Quintus's nod, he continued "Fully investigate him, and nail him to the wall for everything you can make stick. Rescind any current warrant and bounties on Hale, and look into possible reparations, although I can't imagine what we could do of any real impact if one of my bastard cousins arranged to kill off the man's family just for a land-grab. I'll provide a payment to the Buron Cavalry from my personal purse, and pass word to them that they will be considered favorably if they seek a contract with the Federated Suns again. Unless there's anything else, I think we will adjourn here for now." Looking at the other three members of the private meeting, he continued "I shouldn't need to say it, but don't put anything on record about our suspicions of Comstar. Hell, try not to think about it too loudly outside a Shield Room".

Helm, Kurita, Remus and Dansel

December, 2006

GDI Jumpship "Hail Mary, Full of Grace"

Victoria System, Federated Suns

Nadir Jump Point

The Samurai tapped the glass to draw attention from the rest of his team. They were sitting in one of the secure dining rooms, enjoying a fresh meal, the returning Seeker having brought back plenty of fresh foodstuffs after selling off another load of tractors to the locals.

"Thank you everyone, but now is the time for business."

"We are not the only retrieval team." The looks from the other people in the room told him what he already knew. "But then again, I'm quite sure that your respective agencies informed you of that before we left. However, I'm making it official." He paused, and took a sip of water. "There are two other teams. One is headed for a Star League base set in the Deep Periphery by Aleksander Kerensky himself. It's on a world called Columbus, and given that ComStar is scheduled to find it within 24 months, it was viewed as a priority target, if only to deny ComStar vital resources for their expansion."

He waited a moment to let the others digest this information before moving on. "The other team is headed to a world called New Dallas. This world apparently has a memory core as well, but was bombed quite thoroughly with nuclear weapons after the fall of the Star League and other conflicts. That mission has no immediate cover like ours: establishing a factory for all those toys in the cargo holds that we've been selling. For them, secrecy is their protection. An odd thing about this world is that it is mentioned in early source materials, but vanished in later publications, including maps and documents covering the same era. It's as if FASA wanted the world to disappear."

"Now, as for our target on Helm, I have here a sealed package that was given to me before we left Earth. I was informed of what was in it, but I was not to actually open it and brief you all until I felt it was safe to do so." With that, the Samurai broke the seal, and spilled the contents onto the table. Four large manilla envelopes now lay before

him. He picked them up, and passed them around. "Each of these contains a privately commissioned work from FASA and other sources which gives details about the Helm planet, the system, as well as what we can expect there."

Alexander Marius took one of the offered envelopes and opened it, quickly examining the contents. "I don't understand."

Daniel Morris expected this question. "These packets are part of an experiment by GDI intelligence to determine just how far fiction and reality mesh. There was an attempt to dictate certain measures of reality back on Earth with the captured Battlemechs, but that was a failure. The information we have here is a more passive prediction of what we could encounter, and multiple attempts at that."

"Oh hell." This came from the lead electronics technician, a Canadian by the name of James Bowlder. His job was the actual copying and securing of the data in the core itself. "If we can't force reality, the high mucky-mucks want to know if we can accurately predict it, with no previously known counter-information."

The Samurai nodded. "That is correct. And I hope for all our sakes, the information in these packets are wrong, or just contain the occasional lucky guess."

October, 3021

Luthien, Capital of the Draconis Combine

That Tai-sa Ulysses Kurita had been called to an audience before Coordinator Takashi Kurita himself had been an honor to end all honors. Although he knew that he had been called before his sovereign to give his first-hand account of the Battle for Antallos, he was unsure of what was expected from him.

It had been easy enough to deal with the annoying 'advisor' in the aftermath, reporting to his superiors his concerns about the lack of diplomatic skills shown. Hence why he had sent his grand-daughter to be the temporary attache to the GDI. Someone whom he could trust to keep an eye on the honorless Federated Suns in his absence.

He took a deep breath to steady his nerves, only for a worrying thought to cross his mind. He had heard of such audiences that he was about to attend where the Honored Coordinator had, without looking at the supplicant, said "You have disappointed me, you may use the Garden", and that was it. He examined the medals that adorned his uniform for the thousandth time since his arrival in the waiting room. No, all his medals were in order, and there was no error with his presentation. He would not embarrass the Dragon by his presence.

And he had done nothing wrong. If he had, he would not be before the Coordinator for his punishment, but a very short lived military tribunal. Thus, he still had no idea what to expect in reality.

The door opened, and Ulysses snapped to attention. The attendant noted him, and summoned him into the waiting room beyond. He walked crisply across the threshold, and saw many men and women of power arrayed around a table with a map of what he quickly recognized as the section of the Combine as being near Antallos on the table. The Pesht District under Kester Hsuin, whom he also saw at the table.

Ulysses' heart slowed as he gained greater understanding of shy he was here. It was not for punishment, but for a briefing. He stood at perfect attention while waiting for his superiors to address him. It took only a moment before Hsuin looked up, recognizing him. "Ah, Tai-sa, welcome. Coordinator Kurita, this is the man whom we sent to Antallos."

Another man stood up, and turned to face him, and the first thing that went through Ulysses' mind was that he had been certain that Takashi Kurita was supposed to be taller. Instead he found himself in the awkward position of looking down at his Lord. He bowed, and offered the correct greetings as required of him. The Coordinator returned them, and bid him rise.

Ulysses took the invitation, and stepped up to the table. One of the things he saw right away was not the notations of military movements but that Antallos itself was no longer the white of an

independent world. The single golden bronze world stood out against the sea of red Combine worlds, as well as the strip of Federated yellow and Outworlds grey. "So much interest in such a small world. The last time something like this happened was the appearance of the Wolf's Dragoons 20 years ago", the Coordinator mused. "And you were there, Tai-sa. I would speak with you personally about what you saw there, and your impressions. I have read your reports, but they lacked the personal view I wish from you."

Ulysses nodded and gestured with a sweep of the hand at the color changed world, portent of change. "My Lord Coordinator, while I hold the utmost confidence in my reports as to the fact of the engagement, you are correct in knowing that there is more I can say about this new, albeit minor power."

"First, I must stress that for all their tactical power, they were tested against pirates and other undesirables. Their opponents came at them piecemeal, with little sense of tactics beyond massed charges. They were an embarrassment to the name Mechwarrior, and their demise is no loss. Against the proper military might of the Combine, they would fall, despite their lostech."

"Ah, yes." Hsuin agrees as he too studied the map. "That much we all agree upon. But rather, it is their people we wish to know more of."

Chastised, the Tai-sa switched mental tracks. "My Lords, the leader of the GDI on this world is a man by the name of General Don Davis. The majority of our conversations took place in English, but he did take the time to learn civilized greetings in our native tongue. We first met in person when I requested that I identify the body of the pirate, Redjack Ryan, and he made the arrangements. He strikes me deeply as a man of honor. His forces share the same professionalism and honor in their duties, despite a few errant comments. Apparently I resemble a holo-vid actor on Motherlode by the name of Toshirô Mifune, if a bit aged, and the rank and file soldiers of the GDI gave me honor above my station for it."

"Interesting. Please continue."

"My lord, I must admit that the majority of my interactions with the

Global Defense Initiative were with their military members in such matters, and that has limited my ability to understand their culture as a whole. I set one of my officers to act as an interim ambassador until such time as you deigned to recall her, or replace her with a more suitable representative. She too noted in her reports to me that she saw the same contrast of professionalism in their duties as well as the laxness and casual revelry in their off-duty hours. It was implied that the GDI is composed of citizen-soldiers, led by career officers. As for the political power behind the military GDI, I have heard the acronym 'CSN' being used, but as to what it stands for, I do not yet know."

"And this Dansel they call a hero?"

"Coordinator, I was, along with a representative of the Federated Suns", his tone of voice indicated just how little he thought of being in the same room as that person, let alone the same planet, "to an awards ceremony that recognized actions above and beyond the call of duty during the battle. His entire Lance was recognized, and from the actions I saw, if a member of the DCMS performed the same, I would be honored to award those medals myself.

"I must note that they do not place their awards in a spectacular fashion. They are simple medals and ribbons. Of note, their campaign ribbons are simple rectangles with various colored bands denoting the specific actions. Dansel bore three, one I was told was for the repulsion of the initial pirate attack, the 'New Zealand Defense', another was the 'Earth Defense' campaign, for the defeat of the attack from Port Krin. The one he was awarded with in my presence was the defense of Antallos from Redjack Ryan and subsequent battles. He also had ribbons for his military service and training before joining the GDI. Of note, he is apparently a double Ace, twice over. 10 confirmed Mech kills during the second campaign, and more than that during Antallos."

That caused a slight stir in the Mechwarriors present. Making five confirmed kills was an accomplishment, but over twenty in two conflicts? It seemed almost unbelievable. But they did not doubt it, given the amazing sights of the battle. Privately, many of them wanted to test this Dansel against their best, in order to see their

victory and assuage their egos.

"After the ceremony, I talked to him personally, and he seemed to be quite intelligent, though like a commoner who is suddenly thrust into the presence of nobility. He has the air about him of a good man, and very trustworthy." Ulysses fell silent as he waited for his superiors to speak more.

There were more vocal murmurs from the others arrayed about the table. "Interesting." This from a man dressed in the uniform of the intelligence service, Subhash Indrahara.

"Another question then, Tai-sa. Your reports mention a Kurita in the hierarchy of the GDI." The Coordinator didn't ask any questions, but made his intention clear.

"Yes my Lord. He holds the rank of Colonel in the GDI, and is the second in command to General Davis. He has expressed that his family and yours have not been related since before the fall of the Star League. That statement, if true, would help support the theory that Motherlode is a Deep Periphery Star League colony."

"He was present for the Battle?"

"Yes, my lord." The Dragon seemed to ponder this in silence for a few moments.

"What then, do we really know about this new power at our back door?" This question was asked by a woman whom Ulysses thought he recognized, but was not sure of. He did recognize the tone of the question as one being asked repeatedly in this room over the past days and weeks. "We do not know even if their claim that they only hold a couple worlds, including their new conquest. For all we know, they have dozens of worlds in the Periphery that we have no report of."

"That is a worrisome thought, but there is still no evidence of that to be true either." Indrahara took the question and answered it. "The name of their military force indicates a single world. 'Global'. It seems as though Motherlode is their world, and now they have another.

Two worlds is not a threat to the Combine, or any of the other Great Houses." He tapped the map, drawing a line along the edge of the Combine corward. "Nor is there any indication that these people are related to the Minnessota Tribe that certain members of the media keep putting forward. However, my operatives on and headed for Antallos were told to assume nothing about their origins."

"And where is this Motherlode? The world they call Earth?"

"Coordinator, we do not know. With the attempted invasion by the previous administrator of Port Krin, they have been justifiably paranoid in protecting the location of their home, and they tightly control all jumpship traffic to and from it. We could attempt a search of our won, but we do not have the first clue as where to start, nor do we have the jumpships in the Pesht District to spare."

"This is most stressing, and yet we return to the same questions as before." The leader of the Draconis Combine looked down at that lone golden world, and the blank space that lay behind it, so full of the unknown. "And what of the Federated Suns? The Outworlds Alliance? What interest do they have in Antallos and the GDI?"

Subhash Indrahhar shook his head. "My lord, the Alliance is in a constant state of dissarray. They have no interest in Antallos, nor is it possible that Motherlode is in that region of space. As for the honorless Suns, I have the reports that they too are looking into gaining favor with the GDI, for their friendship could represent a means to encircle the OWA, as well as in having a friendly port to our rear."

"That cannot be allowed!" The Dragon hit the table hard to emphasize his opinion about that.

Tai-sa Ulysses was in a bind. It seemed as though he was not supposed to be here, but he had not been dismissed. And the thought of bringing this lapse to the attention of his betters paralyzed him. He wasn't sure what to do, as he could not simply turn and leave. Such would be a grave dishonor.

"There is a large gamble that we could attempt." Indrahhar spoke up.

"On the world of Chirala, there is an annex to the New Samarkand Metals, a Mech factory specializing in parts for light mechs such as the Jenner. They would normally be shipped to the Luthien Armor Works for final assembly."

One of the others about the table leapt to a conclusion. "You don't propose selling one of our active parts factories to a foreign power, do you?"

"No. I suggest an entire Mech Factory."

That brought rounds of loud accusations of treason and calls for his removal. Even Ulysses felt a twist in his gut at the thought, but kept his silence. He saw that both the Coordinator and Indrahara kept their peace in the storm of accusations and disapproval.

"SILENCE!" Takashi Kurita finally roared to bring order back to the discussion. "Subhash. Explain yourself, or I will be forced to summon your replacement." The mortal threat went unstated, but the voice reminded all of why he still ruled.

"My Lord Coordinator, the factory in question was shut down three years ago due to unacceptable corruption, and the New Samarkand Metals have been unable to gain the personnel to properly restart it. As it stands, the entire line is simply wasting space. We can offer the GDI this line, as well as the possibility of future expansion into a full Mech production line in the future to show our friendship and trust.

"They are likely to take this as analysis of the forces at Antallos shows that their entire force consists of salvaged mechs. They fielded nothing that wasn't sent to them in the first place by the initial pirate raid or the followup invasion. The offer to allow them to build their own parts and future Mechs, if under our auspices should prove to be a heavy incentive towards future trade and even an eventual offer to join the Draconis Combine.

"As for us, we gain an active parts factory, a source of income from the leasing of the factory, as well as having a legitimate reason to have an active military presence on the world. We gain a supply node in the region, and the capacity to launch a proper campaign from

that region. It will also give us a constant view into their culture, as well as probable access to their lostech if we go about it correctly.

"And I doubt the AFFS will have anything that can match that."

Hsuin looked thoughtful. "I recall that scandal. They were building substandard parts, and skimming profits for personal gain." His face darkened. "I was at their executions. And it is a large gamble for certain. But I can support the attempt to understand this attempt to study the technology of the GDI, as reports from Antallos indicates that they are already conducting a massive project that they call 'Urban Renewal' to Port Krin."

"However, we must be absolutely certain that our interests are protected." Another person spoke up.

"I make that guarentee," Indrahhar promised, "even if I have to monitor the situation on Antallos personally."

All eyes turned back to the Coordinator, waiting for his assent or dissent. He in turn looked at Ulysses. "Tai-sa, it would appear that I must send you back to Antallos to represent our interests there. This is a heavy responsibility for you, but I have the utmost confidence in your ability to see it through. Please make the offer to the GDI as a token of our appreciation." Ulysses bowed, and made to leave the meeting for his new duties. As he reached the door, the voice of the Coordinator reached back out to him.

"And Tai-sa Ulysses Kurita. Please invite in my name this Colonel Kurita of the GDI to an audience with myself. I am interested in this distant cousin of ours."

September, 3021
Port Krin Antallos

It was, the Wolfnet agent known as Remus Lupin thought to himself as he put his feet up on the dash on his break, a very interesting coincidence. One hand held a large mug of coffee while the other held the book that so held his interest. The book was written in

slightly archaic English, but nothing unreadable. Except for the deliberately mangled words of course, but at least they were italicized in the text.

He flipped the page, reminding himself to note the quality of paper, and that these Third Earthers apparently thought nothing of mass producing paper books. Yet another mystery to add to the pile that was GDI and Motherlode.

The GDI petty officer that loaned these five novels to him did so in apology. There had been yet another confrontation over his cover name, and the officer in question explained that he had the same name as a popular fictional character. A couple days later, he delivered the books, extracting the promise to return them in good condition.

Noting the time, he decided to return to work. As the only employee at the scrap yard with any skill at mech operation, he had been assigned to operate the refurbished Industrial Mech in addition to his other duties. Today he was helping tear down a condemned building in preparation for a new apartment complex. Putting *Harry Potter and the Order of the Pheonix* down, he went back to work.

It was odd, using mechs to help construct something, rather than to shoot at something.

September 01, 2006/3021
GDI Compound, Port Krin
Antallos

Dansel wondered if there was some universal law that required uniforms to be uncomfortable. His new command as head of the Foreign Legion saw himself quickly overwhelmed. Only the excellent efforts of Hale and Al Azim kept him from filing for a transfer back to Earth. Dealing with Sally Ryan would be a cakewalk compared to this.

Reminding himself that technically he was the superior of the man he was about to see, Dansel knocked on the door. "It's open!" He entered

the small sparse office. Inside, Captain Swift of GDI Intelligence (he had to remind himself that they still weren't named NOD) saw him, and bade him to take a seat. Her job was almost as unenviable as his own.

Dansel closed the door behind him, then took the seat, shifting uncomfortably. "Captain" he said by way of greeting.

"Captain. Or is it Major?" Swift smiled, and ran her eyes up and down the man, noting that he tried very hard to not seem like he was a very important person.

"Not sure yet. I've heard both. Apparently a Lieutenant can't be in charge of a brigade of irregulars, and people are afraid to give me actual power." Dansel relaxed a bit.

"Ah, I can see that. Now what did you want to talk to me about?"

"How long have you guys known Brox is a Clanner?"

Captain Swift lost all pretense of humor. She got up, walked to the door, and checked outside to make sure no one was standing there before locking it shut. She went back to her desk, and pulled out a digital player, which she turned on. "White Noise" she said by way of explanation. Leaving Dansel wondering just how big a hornets nest he had fired into, Swift tapped a few commands into her personal computer, and consulted with her screen for a few moments.

"Lt Dansel, and I use that rank because your promotion is not official yet, what I am about to tell you is covered under a multitude of Military Securities regulations. Repeating what I am about to tell you will result in sanctions including but not limited to removal of rank, discharge from the Global Defense Initiative, and a very, very, very long time in a very, very, very dark hole. Understood?"

Dansel nodded. "Yes. It must be Tuesday then. On Wednesdays they threaten me with reading bad fanfiction about my life."

Swift glared, and Dansel threw up his hands in surrender. "I understand!"

Sitting down, the Intelligence Captain folded her hands.

"Mechwarrior Brox was identified as a Clansmen back on Earth during routine medical checkups. When we confronted him about it, he identified himself as a dispossessed Mechwarrior who received his wounds during a Trial of Position. He since fled to the Inner Sphere through means he has not revealed for fear of leading us back to the Kerensky Cluster and the other Clan worlds.

"Since then, we have been keeping an eye on him and his loyalties. And we are prepared to act on any new information that may come up. You are not to do anything to compromise our operations in that regard, understood?"

Dansel nodded. Yep, Sally Ryan was looking more and more like the safe option these days.

Nonstandard Point
New Dallas System
October 2006/3021

The star system lay quiet and anonymous. No Dropships plied its space. No Jumpships waited to carry the nonexistent Dropships to locales up to thirty lightyears distant. There weren't even any human voices carried by electromagnetic waves but for the inaudible transmissions sent from nearby inhabited systems. This star system was silent, alone, and forgotten by the rest of starfaring humanity.

Until now.

A globe of twisted space appeared eight and a half AU from the primary, announcing its presence to anyone who might be looking with a blast of heat and radio noise. But it was very deliberately not a very big blast by the standards of such things. Nor was the event in the traditional points above the poles, but a good thirty degrees off the systems ecliptic plane. The *Merchant* class Jumpship that materialized when the bubble of non-einsteinian space evaporated also did not engage its fusion powered station keeping drive as was customary. There was no need to; in another yet untraditional measure, the Jumpship's return to normal space had been tailored to include a slight sideways velocity relative to the star, just enough to put it in solar orbit.

"Jump complete," announced Lieutenant Simone Dupree, the navigator of the *GDS Hood*. True, her primary job consisted of entering raw data into a laptop which then crunched the numbers into values that would be acceptable by the centuries old jump computer. But for safety reasons alone, she and others like her had to know what those numbers meant, especially when pulling off such an unorthodox jump.

"Very good, Lieutenant," Colonel Jason Alvarez replied. He turned to the other stations. "Any sign that we have been or will be spotted?"

The phrasing of the question while peculiar was perfectly sensible. The *Hood's* jump point was picked specifically because it went against

every convention practiced by the Inner Sphere. It was off the ecliptic just enough to make the unlikely collision with a stray rock even unlikelier but far enough from the standard points that anyone watching for incoming jumpships would be looking in the wrong direction. That still didn't preclude someone being in the wrong position or being close enough to see them anyway. And of course because of light speed lag, anyone in a position to see them wouldn't necessarily see them right away.

But if the information that spawned this mission was correct, there were no observers anyway. It didn't hurt to be cautious, though.

"Radio bands are clean, sir," Captain James Adams reported. "I'm not getting any radio noise that's not a natural source."

"Passives clear," Lieutenant Alexi Korolev reported. "No anomalous IR or light sources in immediate area. Computers processing data for signs of spacecraft further in-system now."

"Good enough," Alvarez said. "Let me know the moment anything changes."

"Yes, sir."

"And now," Alvarez mused aloud, "we wait."

* * *

"Alright, people, listen up!" Colonel Don Wayne, the New Dallas mission CO, said to the soldiers and civilians of the expedition in the cargo bay. "We've been sitting on the edge of the New Dallas system for five days, and according to Colonel Alvarez, there hasn't been a sign that anyone's here. But that just means his people haven't seen any drive plumes or picked up any radio transmissions. If anyone is still here, they're keeping a low profile. But as it stands, our mission is still a go."

A projected image showed up on the blank wall behind Wayne. It showed a stylistic image of a star system compete with circles representing planetary orbits, along with other dots with various

labels.

"We apparently got lucky on our jump into the system," Wayne continued. "The *Hood* jumped in on the same side of the local sun as where the planet New Dallas is currently located. So here's the plan: In two hours, the *Earl Wyatt* and *Jesse James* will detach from the *Hood* and proceed in-system. Transit time is estimated to be eight days. We could use the *Hood* to jump in closer using the New Dallas-sun pirate point, but that would unnecessarily risk our connection with home."

The graphic obligingly changed to show a curved line linking the *Hood* with the planet on the second orbital ring. A dot was placed on about the middle of the curve spawning off dotted lines that spread out towards New Dallas.

"At the turn around point," Wayne continued, pointing at the half way marker, "we'll be launching probes to do a fly by of New Dallas before we begin our deceleration burn. If there's anyone with ships and fighters waiting for us, the probes should see them. If not, the probes will at least give us our first close up look at the planet. Doctor?"

A civilian stepped up – floated really given the lack of gravity – to join Wayne. This was Doctor Frank Williams, head of expedition's civilian contingent. They were mostly scientists and Williams himself had done a great deal of consulting work with the United States government even before the *Drakon* had dropped in on New Zealand.

And not entirely by coincidence some people speculated, Williams was also from Dallas, the original. That he wore the Lone Star flag instead of the customary national flag on his shoulder just emphasized the fact.

"Thank you, Colonel," Williams said. "As I'm sure you all know, our information of conditions on New Dallas was sketchy at best. Most of what we know comes from the Sourcebooks which was pretty sparse on detail. What we know from them basically amounts to the planet being nuked into uninhabitability during the early stages of the Succession Wars. But at the same time, those same sourcebooks said

that a man was able to walk around on that same planet centuries later to no ill effect on his health. And of course, there's supposed to be a treasure trove in the form of a Star League memory core down there somewhere.

"Of course, the information we have from the Sourcebooks is basically unverified," Williams continued, "especially since most of the events I alluded to have technically not happened yet... and may never happen at all. However, present day BT sources of information reveal that yes, there is in fact a planet named New Dallas right where the Sourcebooks said it's supposed to be and yes, the planet is listed as uninhabitable. By the same token, none of the few information sources we found had been updated in centuries, and none of few BT people we asked had even heard of the place. So this entire mission is based on the gamble that the Sourcebooks are right, that New Dallas is no longer uninhabitable.

"In that regard at least, our preliminary observations of the planet are promising so far. Spectroscopic analysis reveals an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere in a comfortable temperature range. There's also no sign of radioactivity that would make landing hazardous. So if all goes well, we may very well be able to establish a long term base here."

* * *

"Uninhabitable my ass," Doctor Williams muttered disgustedly as he studied the latest readings from the latest set of probes sent down to the planet from the orbiting Dropships.

"I take it that it's safe to go down?" Wayne asked, looking up from the photomaps of the planet's surface. The maps were dominated by a great deal of greenery.

"There are a lot of ruins, complete with huge ass craters in the middle of cities and towns," Williams said, "but not much radioactivity. Hell, one of the probes landed in the middle of one of those craters and reported less radiation than what I've seen come out of coal plant back on Earth! If the Inner Sphere used nukes here, they were really clean nukes."

"Well it's nice to get verification," Wayne said. "But it wasn't really necessary." He handed Williams one of his maps. "Check this out, Doctor."

"What's this?" Williams asked. Then he did a double take. "Is that..."

"Yes, Doctor," Wayne confirmed. "That's *farmland*. Someone is still living here."

New Dallas
New Dallas System
Former Terran Hegemony
October 3021

"SHERIFF!!!"

The shout that broke the peace and quiet, sending atumbling the man slumped in the chair with his feet propped up on the desk in front of him, his head tilted back and eyes closed in contemplation of deep and meaningful plans. He hit the ground with a thump and yell of startlement that did little to add to the dignity of his office.

And no, he hadn't been sleeping on the job. Really!

Sheriff Bubba Colton scrambled off the floor and glared over his desk at the old coot who had just barged into his office.

"What do you want, Jesse?" the Colton demanded irately. Nope, there was no covering any personal inadequacies with belligerence here. None at all. "I'm a busy man, y'know."

"Gonna be even busier, Sheriff," Jesse replied. "We're about to be invaded. You need to call out the Home Guard now!"

"Oh, lordy, not this again," Colton muttered as he came around the desk. "You're going senile, old man. There ain't no moving lights in the sky. There ain't no giant mechs comin' to steal our riches and women. And there ain't no Droppers. Ain't no one see any of that in nigh two hundred years or more. You're seeing things, Jesse."

"Seeing things, am I?" Jesse replied, insulted as the aspersions cast upon his character. "C'mere, then."

"Hey!" Colton squawked when Jesse grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him over to the window with a strength that belied his age. He was the county sheriff, dagnabbit! He should be treated with more respect! "Lemme go!"

"Seeing things am I?" Jesse repeated, shoving the sheriff's head out the open window. He pointed in the direction of the Old Capitol City. "So tell me I ain't seeing that."

There in the distance – Colton couldn't tell how far because he didn't have a frame of reference – burned two pillars of brilliant flame atop each of which sat a shiny metal marble descending from the sky. A low rumble filled the air. They fit the descriptions in the old yarns about Droppers perfectly.

The Sheriff gawked, mouth moving but no sound coming out.

* * *

"Sir, we've definitely been noticed by the locals," Captain Tasha Petronova reported. She had to shout to be heard over the vibration of the running through the *Earl Wyatt*. While the fusion engine ran was pretty smooth and quiet in space, in atmosphere, its exhaust plume created all sorts of turbulence that shook the modified *Union* class Dropship like a baby rattle. "Observation satellites are showing people converging on at least five villages. Some of them appear to even be using powered ground vehicles of some sort."

Colonel Wayne signaled acknowledgement. Motorized vehicles were the latest in a long litany of things that they hadn't expected. First, the planet was supposed to be irradiated wasteland; it wasn't. Second, it was supposed to be uninhabited; the farmlands and villages spotted from orbit gave the lie to that as well. Third, there own preliminary observations of the villages had led them to believe that the New Dallas locals had regressed to a pre-industrial level of technology; now that appeared to not be the case either.

If it weren't for the fact that New Dallas's continents were the wrong shape, Wayne would have started thinking that they had just discovered another ISOTed Earth, one from some alternate universe where World War III had really happened.

Good thing he had opted to be cautious, Wayne thought. The LZ he had chosen was in one of the craters left by a nuke. It was sufficiently close to the ruins do that they could explore easily while at the same

time far enough from the villages so that the expedition could control how, when, and where they met with the locals. As near as his people could tell, the city ruins were still uninhabited, so there wouldn't be any locals nearby when they landed.

* * *

"Hooey! Look at the size of that Dropper, Bob," the boy – young man really, but everyone called him and his cousin 'boys' – said as he looked at the Dropper through the telescope, a relic they had found in the ruins with fancy magic numbers that told the user how far away stuff was. They were hidden on an upper floor of a tower that bordered the crater the Droppers had landed in. "Must be darn near a hundred meters tall."

"Nah, I make it closer to eighty or ninety, Luke," the other boy said. "Can you see who they are?"

The boys had been in the Old Capitol City scavenging for high tech when the Droppers had come down. They knew that weren't supposed to be in the City because there was supposed to be some kind of poison in its air, but the boys had never gotten sick all the times they had visited looking for useful scrap. The few times they had been caught, they had been thoroughly whopped and told how lucky they had been. Still that didn't stop them from coming back from time to time. People needed the stuff they found.

"Uh, there's some kind of yellow birdy painted on the side," Luke said. "That must make 'em the Sunnies, right?"

"Nah, the Sunnies got a sword," Bob said. "It's the Fowls that got birds."

"I thought the Fowls had purple birds," Luke said doubtfully. "And ain't it Owies that got a sword?"

"Well if'n I remember my lessons right," Bob said slowly, trying to remember old tales told to them by their Ma and Pa, "both the Sunnies and the Owies use a sword brand."

"That's stupid," Luke protested. "Why would two Houses use the same brand?"

"You got me there," Bob admitted. "But it's true, I tell you."

"But... hold on, I think they're coming out," Luke said, turning his attention back on the Dropper.

A huge ramp had lowered from one of the Dropper's side. At the top of the ramp, great doors opened, sliding aside instead of swinging open like naturally designed doors. The boys braced themselves to see giant walking mechs step out. Instead, tiny figures scurried out to the bottom of the ramp. Were they even human? The boys couldn't tell what with them being completely covered from head to foot. But the things in their arms were definitely guns of some kind.

* * *

"I don't like this," Doctor Williams said, scowling at the image of the soldiers in full MOPP gear at the bottom of the ramp as they alternately tested the air with equipment and watched the surroundings. The latter was of dubious value given that the ground had been more or less glassed centuries ago; the nearest semi-intact structure was better than 500 meters away.

"Better safe than sorry, Doctor," Wayne replied. "Besides which, it should be safe enough. Didn't all our testing show that the radioactivity had all died away?"

"It's not that," Williams griped. "It's making that poor soldier be the guinea pig. We should at least have drawn straws or something."

"Standard procedure when dealing with a possibly contaminated environment, Doctor," Wayne told him. "Lowest man on the totem pole has to be the one to be the guinea pig because theoretically, he's the one we can most afford to lose."

"There's only thirty of us down here," Williams grumbled. "We can't afford to lose anyone."

It was true. Given that they had to trek across better than half the Inner Sphere to reach New Dallas and simultaneously carry enough cargo to establish a base on the planet, the amount of people that the two cargo variant Unions was strictly limited. That meant everyone had to be an expert in at least one scientific field or other, which in turn meant that the "lowest man on the totem pole" was an O-3 Captain originally trained as an engineer for a nuclear submarine

"Unfortunately, someone has to be the guinea pig," Wayne said, watching as the Captain took off his protective mask to breath in the New Dallas air.

Several minutes later, Captain guinea pig seemed perfectly fine and all the equipment still showed zilch as far as NBC contamination went. It looked like New Dallas was perfectly safe... at least as far as the environment went.

"Okay, everything looks good," Wayne told his people. "Let's get these Droships unpacked."

* * *

"Hey, look! Mechs!"

The old stories all agreed that when the Droppers came back, they'd be bringing men in giant metal suits to kill and destroy in the name of whatever House they served. So far that hadn't been happening. Instead, the Droppers had disgorged people and trucks carrying stuff. What stuff, neither boy could say, but there was a lot of it. And there were more working trucks in one place here than either boy had seen in their entire lives.

But up until now, neither had seen anything that resembled mechs. Until now. Still, there was something off about them...

"Are you sure those are mechs, Bob?" Luke said doubtfully.

The mechs – if mechs they were – weren't acting like marauding engines of mass destruction. They were... carrying stuff out of the Droppers just like the people and trucks were.

"I'm sure they're mechs," the other boy said, equally doubtfully.
"Maybe."

"I dunno, maybe..." Luke broke off when something caught his attention. "Hey, check out the guy in charge."

"Which guy is that?"

"The one that ain't carrying stuff and waving his arms like a chicken," Luke explained. "Look at his shoulder."

"I can't see anything," Bob complained. "My scope's not as good as yours."

"The guy in charge, he's got the Flag on his shoulder," Luke said.

"You're kidding."

"No, seriously, he does!" Luke insisted. "These guys ain't the Houses. It's the Camrons come back!"

"But..."

"C'mon, we gotta go say hello!"

"But... hey, wait for me!"

* * *

"No, no, no!" Williams shouted, waving his arm at the *Javelin* pilot carrying a crate full of tents. "Put it over there!" The *Javelin* and *Commando* battlemechs had been deemed to light and fragile to serve in the GDI's 1st Brigade, so they had been allocated to the New Dallas expedition as a combination combat vehicle and cargo mover.

"Sorry, Doc..." the *Javelin* pilot began to reply when she was rudely interrupted.

"Alert! Active fusion signature! Incoming from the city!" blared out from

Dropships' external speakers.

The Javelin dropped the crate. Williams winced as it hit the ground. Luckily, there was nothing fragile in it.

"Doctor Williams," the Javelin pilot said, as it stepped past the crate. *"Please take cover."*

Williams opened his mouth to object, when the familiar notes of Dixie filled the air. The sounds were coming from the direction of the city. Looking in that direction, Williams spotted an orange painted wheeled vehicle take to the air to clear a low wall. It landed, slewed around in a spray of gravel and dirt and approached the GDI party at a much more sedate pace. The car came to a stop at the edge of group.

Two men climbed out of the car through the windows. The vehicle either had no doors, or they weren't functional. One man was blond, the other dark haired.

Williams pinched himself to make sure he was still awake.

"Howdy!" the blond man said with a thick accent. "I'm Luke. This is my brother Bob. Welcome to New Dallas!"

* * *

"Well, it's certainly an interesting coincidence," Wayne said, studying the fusion powered car. Except for being painted bright orange with the flag on top – not even the Confederate Flag but the Texas flag – the vehicle didn't look a bit like a 1969 Dodge Charger. It looked more like the bastard love child of a monster truck and the 1960s TV Batmobile. "What are the odds, Doctor?"

"Astronomical, Colonel," Williams said as he joined him. "Simply astronomical. I couldn't even begin to calculate the odds."

"Well as interesting as that might be, I'm more concerned about the implications of the locals having fusion powered vehicles," Wayne went on. "We thought from our orbital sweep that these people had

regressed to a pre-industrial level. Now that looks to not be the case."

"Actually, Colonel, it may still be the case," Williams disagreed. "From what those two let drop," he waved at the two locals who were currently attempting to flirt with a female scientist maybe twice their age, "the General Li..."

"General Lee?"

"Li, Chinese spelling. It's actually hand written on the other side there," Williams explained, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the car. He shrugged. "I don't know why it's named that, and I suspect neither do they. It's apparently an old family heirloom dating back to the Star League days. I would guess that any and all high tech we're going to be seeing the locals use are going to be more of the same, stuff either passed down the family tree or salvaged from the ruins around here."

"How's that possible?" Wayne asked. "Wait, I know the answer. It's BT Ragnarok proofing again, right?"

"Right," Williams agreed. "The Star League built their stuff to last. I will say that I think the odds of finding the New Dallas Memory Core just went up though."

"Oh?" Wayne asked. "Why do you think that? I'll admit having a local source of supply for things like food would make establishing a base easier, but I'm going to have to detail people to deal with the locals, which means fewer bodies to explore the ruins."

"Colonel, you're looking at this all wrong," Williams told him. "You shouldn't be thinking of the locals as a problem. Think of them as guides. Bob and Luke here for example have spent lots of time exploring these ruins. If anyone knows where there's a bunker holding lots of Star League goodies including said memory core, it's going to be them."

Columbus
Columbus System
October 1st 2006/3021

Dawn came slowly, as the terrific mass of Epsilon Pegasii rolled into view. The orange supergiant cast the entire system in a wan light, and it would be hours before Columbus would see light that humanity would equate with 'day'. Five hours of dusk, give or take, followed by a three hour stretch of 'daytime', then the slow descent into dusk.

But today they weren't here to watch the sunrise. They weren't here to study atmospheric data, or even load up dropships with supplies.

Today they were here to pay their respects- and leave.

"We've come a long way," intoned Richard Sanford- commander of the expedition. "We, from our ancestral home, who once never dreamed we would travel so far within our lifetimes. But here we are. With new friends- new *allies*."

"Let's be off," he said, giving the order. Each of his soldiers gave a salute, standing at attention as the massive doors of the Whale class dropship closed and locked- and then the engines rumbled with renewed power. A moment later and they were lifting, heading into space once more.

They saw little of orbit- the command deck was busy enough as it was, running final checks, and ensuring that docking went as planned. Ragnarok proofing was grand and all, but there had been concerns about docking pressure and collar tolerances. As the levantine dropship nestled aside the waiting Star Lord, a final communication went out. Thrusters fired, and engines pulsed, aligning each ship with their exit vector.

Then with a flash, each ship vanished in turn, leaving the pirate point- and Epsilon Pegasi, behind.

Moments later, space wrent asunder and another vessel swam into view. Burnished gold and armour plate, the vessel had no markings save one. A line of ancient text, etched on the hull.

S.D.S Verge.

Communications opened briefly between that ghost of a ship and the installations on the moon's surface- a trading of recognition codes, a sharing of accrued data. Then the guiding intelligence of the moon's primary installation sent one final set of data- a recognition and access code for something ancient, something hidden. A puzzle box of intricate construction.

The ghost vessel acknowledged receipt, then put that data to use. Directing its own puzzle box, albeit one much smaller and less complex, that ship shifted it, rearranged it. And then, suddenly, it was receiving and transmitting. There was a code- a signal. There was a trail- a path blazed through the heavens- and that ghost of a ship, an old wolf on one final mission- it had the scent. Adjusting its calculations briefly, and referencing old data it proceeded to orient itself. Then, with one final glance back at Columbus, it vanished in a crack of distorted spacetime.

GDI base, office building
Port Krin, Antallos
October 14th 3021

Major Staedele was bored. Really bored. The last 4 weeks had been nothing but the monotonous practice of standard garrison duty lightened up only by the continued training exercises with the new blood in GDI's "Foreign Legion". That, and the fact that they had finally gotten the artillery trucks to work as advertised and used them to spring a couple dirty tricks on the new guys during the exercises. Between that, the days basically came down to him sitting in this little, bare office and doing all kinds of paperwork. And inspections, because if even he was bored, he had quite the idea how bored the rest of the unit was. And bored soldiers tended to become... creative.

Contact with Motherload (given the secrecy ordered by General Davis, the Colonel preferred not to think too hard about that strange place) was also still rather slow, but the jump ship circuit did work wonders in keeping the Burons in contact with their families back on Motherload. It also enabled him to at least somewhat manage business. Two major weapons manufacturers had almost flooded the mail address of his unit at Fort Irwin with requests and offers and old Filatov, the civilian quartermaster of the Cav, had been promoted to the unit's representative, so he could carry out the negotiations until they would be relieved from garrison duty. Which could very well take another few months.

Still bored, the Major's eyes wandered over his almost bare desk, holding only an intercom and a glass of water, back to the newest heap of paperwork. He took a gulp. Apparently, a few techs and two infantrymen had drunk a bit too much the day before and spent the night in the drunk tank after they had picked a fight with a few MPs. He sighed. Latrine duty and a one-shot pay reduction for the whole lot, he decided. But first, he'd have to talk with the responsible officers to...

Staedele's train of thought was rudely interrupted by the intercom on his desk suddenly letting out an annoying beeping sound. He cursed. "Didn't I tell everyone that they shouldn't disturb me for an hour or

so?"

He pressed the button. "Major Stadele."

"Boss, this is Marc. I'm at the base entrance. Sorry for disturbing you, but we have a ComStar Adept out here with a couple messages for us, including some he is only authorised to hand to you in person."

Stadele growled. "Couldn't you simply tell him to hand them over to you?"

"Sorry, I already tried that. Guy says he really can't do that."

Stadele answered in a resigned voice. "Fine, Marc, I'll come over. Tell him to wait for another few minutes." Then he deactivated the intercom and went for the door.

10 minutes later

Stadele entered his office carrying a small folder with ComStar insignia printed on under his arm.

"Well, at least he apologised for all the commotion."

"Yeah. No crying over the lost time for paperwork from me, Marc. And you seem to have nothing to do, either..."

"Guilty as charged, boss. I might as well take a look at the mail, too, don't you think?"

"Be my guest, Marc." And, with a gesture to the chair across the desk, the Major sat down on his chair, took a gulp of water and opened the envelope. "Let's see what we have here... a notification from the MRB that they received our status update and have put the information out on the board. And here we have... oh, a few personal letters to some of your men. I'm going to put them into the envelopes here, not my job sniffing into the private mail of my men. We'll have to show all this to the spooks anyway, but *my* conscience will be clear. Afterwards, you will deliver them, given that you have nothing to do. How's that sound?"

"As if you had that much work, boss..."

"Privilege of the superior, Marc. Sometimes, it's quite handy."

The Major grabbed the glass of water on the desk and took a mouthful before beginning to read the next letter. The next thing Johnson saw were the eyes of the Major widening just before he choked and spit the water on the ground, nearly dousing everything on the desk.

"What the...? Are you okay?" Johnson asked.

Staedele coughed a few times before answering. "Yes, I am okay. Except that I seem to be having hallucinations. I couldn't have possibly read what I think I just read. Let me try that again." Staedeles eyes again wandered to the paper in his hands, re-reading the opening lines. He didn't say a thing, but the shocked expression on his face remained. Johnson wondered. He had never seen the Major at a loss of words.

"Would you please stop teasing me and tell me what's written there that is so shocking?" he asked.

"Well, I think it'd be best if I read it out loud, because there's no other way that *I* would believe that."

*From: Hanse Davion, First Prince of the Federated Suns
To: Major Andreas Staedele, Commanding Officer, Buron Cavalry
Subject: Apology
Date: August 31st, 3021*

Dear Major Staedele,

we have heard about the treatment you received from the official in charge of your last assignment with the AFFS, one Alexander Davion, and hereby express our deepest regrets at the way this man acted. Words cannot express how truly sorry we are for the way your unit has been treated after returning into the Federated Suns. Be assured that his acts were in no way authorized or condoned by his superiors in the AFFS or the Directorate of Mercenary relations and that he will face disciplinary

measures over this matter.

Your unit has gone above and beyond the call of duty and the terms of your contract with House Davion during the raid on Thestria and these actions have not gone unnoticed. As a compensation for the treatment you received after your return as well as a reward for your courageous actions, we have decided to transfer a bonus payment to your ComStar account.

While we are certain that this will not, no, cannot compensate for the lives of the men you lost on your assignment, we do hope that it is sufficient as an apology for the slights caused to you by the deeds of our official. We sincerely hope that you will decide to work for us again in the future and assure you that such a faux-pas will not happen again.

Sincerely,

Hanse Davion, First Prince of the Federated Suns

That's it, Marc. And I still can't believe it."

"Make that two, boss. Wow... Hanse Davion? What the hell?"

"I know. And down here... it's a confirmation from ComStar. 20 million C-Bills have been transferred to our account. Directly from an account that is privately owned by none other than Hanse Davion. I... I don't know what to say."

"Me neither."

Both men remained silent for a short while. The sheer magnitude of the situation had an almost paralysing effect. Then, Staedele spoke up.

"I need to inform General Davis. Right now. Until then, this is a secret between us. Don't spoil the surprise to anyone, you hear, Marc?", he said, while hurriedly leaving the office.

CSN, Diplomacy, Wolfnet, Minutes

01 December 2006

**UN Building, New York, Earth
Sol II, Granville Cluster**

"And there you have it people. Like the League of Nations in the middle of the last century, the United Nations of the 20th Century has folded. In an epic address by President Jack Ryan, in addition to the Chinese and Russian Presidents, they, along with over 100 nations, withdrew from the venerable institution today, citing that it was no longer capable of representing the needs of the world given our new position in the galaxy at large.

"In it's place, the long talked about Coalition of Sovereign Nations, or CSN was officially inaugurated today mere minutes after the dissolution of the last General Assembly of the UN. It will take many of the responsibilities of the now defunct UN, but it's major stated goal is the representation of Earth on the galactic political stage.

"The Global Defense Initiative, or GDI, long a formal transnational unified military force for off-world actions was also formally placed under the political command of the CSN today. This resolves major issues surrounding the legality of hiring Mercenaries by nations such as the United States that had laws against such actions.

"Vocal critics of the CSN point out that it has little to no power over the internal affairs of the member nations. They feel that this focus on the Inner Sphere and other regions will turn a blind eye towards internal issues such as humanitarian aid in Africa.

"This is Daryn Kagan, reporting live from outside the former United Nations Building. Back to you, Leon!"

"Thank you Daryn. Now, one of the first issues facing the CSN is the selection of it's first head to replace the former Secretary General of the UN..."

17 December 3021

Draconis Combine Embassy Port Krin, Antallos

Shanti Taro Kurita was a middle-aged woman who had long served the Pescht District in their internal negotiations with other provinces. This post was an excellent boost to her career, long that she feared had dead ended. Even though the CSN was a small periphery state, it was still an improvement in her fortunes.

At the moment though, her and the CSN ambassador had agreed to a small break in the days negotiations. She reclined in a private room with her military advisor, Sho-sa Alicia Kurita whom she had replaced as the lead diplomat. Something for which the younger Kurita held no grudge, being far more comfortable in a Battlemech than at a table.

"This Charles Smith is indeed an expert wordsmith." Alicia said as she took a sip of water. "I think he is more appreciative of your presence over mine."

"Now then, cousin, he is a good diplomat. I'm sure he recognized that you were temporary and sought to maintain a level of decorum more suited to you than to I." The elder woman tried poured some sugar into a cup of tea that was gifted to her by Ambassador Smith upon her arrival at her post. He called it "Earl Grey" and she found it to her taste after sweetening.

"I know, Ambassador. But it felt wrong for me to be in that position, and I cannot help but wonder if I insulted him with my fumbled attempts at your duties."

"Sho-sa, he is a professional, not like the Davion dogs. He would not take offence to you no more than I would to any military officer put into your position."

"Very well, but I still felt inadequate to my duties, and that bothers me." Alicia finished her water, and waited while Shanti did the same.

"Do not worry over that, cousin. Rather, see it as you being given the opportunity to expand your bounds in the service of the Dragon."

Alicia stood, and Shanti did the same. "That may be true, Ambassador, and I will reflect upon your words. But now, I believe it is time to return to the meeting room. Perhaps we will be there before the CSN ambassador this time."

Shanti smiled, and nodded as she rose. "Let us be off then." They quickly left the room, and walked down the hall towards the meeting room. The faint smell of fresh paint still lingered in the air, though both ignored it.

Entering the designated room, they found Charles Smith seated there, reviewing the contents of a folder marked with the symbol of the CSN, political masters of the GDI. He stood as they entered the room, and bowed as was his custom. It wasn't a proper Combine greeting, but the sentiment was there so the two women returned the gesture. Taking to their seats, Shanti consulted some of her own papers, noting that the guards from both the GDI and the Combine seemed relaxed. That was a good thing.

Ambassador Kurita raised her head from her papers to speak, only to find the stare of Smith coming at her. The mental pressure put on her by this gaze made her sympathize with the Sho-sa, and she did her best to dismiss it as the trick that it was. "Ambassador Smith, we seem to only have a couple points left to address this day before we retire. The first of which is the return of Kuritan citizens still held as prisoners on your world."

"Ah, yes. As I know you are aware, Ambassador Kurita, we would certainly repatriate your citizens, but there are two major issues that stay our hand in that matter. First is that the Kuritans currently on Earth are there because they took part in acts of Piracy against our world, as well as participating in the attempted invasion launched by the late administrator of Port Krin. They cannot simply be set free without due legal process."

Shanti recognized a prepared response when she saw one, and the Motherlode delivered a perfect one. Fortune smiled on her, as she too had a response already prepared. "Charles," she said, knowing the use of first names around the diplomacy table was yet another part of

the Game, "we certainly understand that. However, it is our concern that our citizens may be falsely dealt with under your laws, and as the Dragon himself is interested in the safety of his people, we must ask that you either hold such trials here at Port Krin where the Combine can observe, or that you allow proper legal representation from the Draconis Combine to travel to Motherlode to represent and aid our citizens."

The ultimatum on the table, Charles leaned forward, closing the folder in front of him. "I must also raise the second issue, my dear Shanti Taro." He tapped the symbol on the folder. "The location of my homeworld is a secret, and those persons currently detained on Earth are there because they may have information that could be leaked to more pirates and other parties of ill repute who may think to raid our world which they think defenseless while the GDI is here. I am certain you can understand our desire to keep that secrecy from even our allies and friends until such time as we can be sure of the defense of our home."

Shanti kept her face calm as she picked at the logic. He wasn't saying certain things, and she recognized that silence was as valuable as what was said. "Perhaps then, we can send representatives to your world on your jumpships? That would help with your security, and help establish a trust between our peoples."

Charles too kept a good poker face as Shanti took the unspoken offer. It was a calculated risk, but his superiors back on Earth had spent many long and loud hours talking about this exact scenario. But they had reached a conclusion, and one that had been passed along to him. At the moment though, he wanted to seem like he was the one making the decision, rather than simply passing along made months ago.

"Very well. It seems like we have little choice in the matter. I can allow a small team of legal and diplomatic representatives to take a GDI Jumpship back to Earth for this purpose."

"Excellent! I suppose then I shall have my staff confer with yours about the details." The decision made, subordinates on both sides would deal with the details, and only if there was some major issue

would it come again to the attention of the people in this room as more than a report to read. "Now, for the last point."

"Ah yes, you have been quite secretive about this point, and I confess some curiosity at it. Natural, I suppose."

"Indeed. When this message came down to me from Coordinator Kurita himself, I too was taken aback. You see..."

GDI Compound
Office of General Davis
Port Krin, Antallos
Same Day

General Davis looked deep into Ambassador Smith's eyes and saw no duplicity in them. "They what?" he asked again, not really sure of the windfall he had just been given.

"The Draconis Combine, as near as I can tell, are countering the Davion's move towards our mercenary companies by offering us a mothballed Mech parts factory. It isn't one to build weapons, rather it was meant to build the internal structure and chassis of some of their lighter Mechs, such as the Jenner."

Davis settled back into his chair, letting the abused piece of furniture take his weight. "That is quite... What did you say?"

"That I had to consult with you first. Although I was tempted to simply say 'Yes' right there, I didn't want to seem to be to eager to take the offer. There are strings attached though."

"There always are. What are they?"

"First, it will be a lease. Not a sale. We won't own the factory itself, but will be responsible for it. Secondly, we'll be producing parts for the Combine, as well as for ourselves. Thirdly, they would require the deployment of a Mech detachment to guard their investment, both against us should we try to backstab them, but nominally to guard against the Federated Suns."

"How many Mechs are we looking at here?"

"About 32 to 36, General. Under the direct command of Tai-sa Ulysses Kurita."

"The man who commanded the DC forces that arrived soon after we did. I think we can trust him as he didn't take advantage of us after we finished off the pirates and other marauders. He won't do anything stupid."

"So, you agree to their proposal then?"

"It's a gamble." Davis mulled over his thought aloud. While the final decision was in the hands of Smith, this was important enough, and big enough in both the long and short terms that his own consultation would be necessary. "The Combine could see this as an excuse to keep deploying more forces here, citing some vague threat to the factory that would require it. And how the Davions would respond when they find out could also be problematic."

Smith nodded in agreement. "But there is also the issue of our orders to get as much salvagable and working material as we can, and this factory would go a long way towards that."

Davis sighed. He had hoped that Smith's arrival would relieve him of some of his headaches, but it seemed like this wasn't to be the case. "For what it's worth, I can find no reasonable way to reject this offer without offending the Kuritans. I know this could blow up in our faces, but if it's Tai-sa Ulysses in charge of the forces, I think we can take the chance."

Smith rose. "Thank you General. I'll convey our acceptance to the Ambassador, and send a priority message to Earth, asking them to send specialists and whatever they think prudent for this."

Sian, Capellan Confederation
GDI Dropship *Faith and Trust* (Seeker Class)
31 December 09

David Jackson stretched his neck as he sat in his office on the

Dropship. He was the civilian representative of John Deere attached to this mission. While most of the crew were spooks and military men, his was the actual job of signing contracts for deliveries, as well as resources for the future plant on Helm. He was a Company man, single and no living relatives, which made him suitable for this mission, in addition to his business sense and acumen.

Today, he had signed a delivery contract with one of the semi-socialist state controlled companies for the delivery of 500 units of farming equipment. Tractors, combines, sprayers, the works. Down on the floor of the dropship, other employees, as well as GDI personnel used for grunt work, and on-the-job training were already processing the order, preparing dissembled units for transport.

He reflected on his 'employees'. They were either like him, employees of the company, single and expendable (he really didn't like that word, but after weeks away from home, he came to terms with it), or members of the GDI who were learning their covers. Some of them were even fairly good at their second jobs, and his best salesman was one of the head spooks. Probably had something to do with being in a job where a glib tongue was required.

David shuffled some papers, and came up with a list of current resources to his expedition, as well as current finances. There were well into the black on this trip, the simplicity of what they were selling, as well as their non-military nature made for good sales wherever they went.

Privately, he reckoned that sales like this would make John Deere one of the largest companies in the history of mankind if it kept up. But then he returned to the immediate realities, and noted that while they had a machine shop to make more tractors, they were running low on certain basic materials, like galvanized rubber and the trademarked green paint. He wrote a note on his terminal, and sent it off to the right people about the lack, trusting them to get what he needed to keep the mission's cover intact.

He shut off his terminal, and stood up. But for now, work was at an end, and it was time to get ready for the New Year's celebration coming right up.

HQ of the Wolf's Dragoons

Unknown Location, Lyrar Commonwealth

Colonel Jamie Wolf paced back and forth, the contents of the Wolfnet brief important enough for his own personal input. The agent on Antallos had sent in several reports by way of secure channels, and he and the head of Wolfnet conferred over the contents.

"So, there is no relation between these GDI and the Falcons?" Jamie had been worried from the start that there had been some hidden influence from their Clan's enemies on this upstart Periphery state. The vague similarity between the symbols of the Falcons and the Global Defense Initiative had raised many questions, and it seemed like there was an answer at hand at last.

"None, Colonel. Our agent in place indicates that while the GDI has access to advanced technology, none of it matches Falcon technology."

"And the *Timber Wolf*?"

"The GDI calls it a *Mad Cat*, sir. To them, it was the logical addition of arms from what we think may be a *Marauder* to the sides of a *Catapult*, reducing the laser weapons on the base 'Mech to two Medium Lasers to make room for the additional armor and ammo. It weighs in at about 75 tonnes."

"Mad Cat, huh. A Franken-Mech then. It's good to know that it's simply a coincidence." The trust in his agent went unstated. "Their weapons technology?"

"He confirms that they use Ballistic and Artillery technology almost exclusively, hoarding their salvaged energy weapons carefully."

"Ammunition problems in long fights."

"That would be the case, as their defense of Port Krin showed."

"Mercenaries?"

"Headed up by the Buron Cavalry. A decent group that got a bad deal from the Davions, and it seems like the GDI favor them as examples of how good they can be."

The Wolfnet head handed Wolf another sheet of paper. "He's also asking for a couple more agents to support him. The GDI are rapidly expanding on Antallos, and he feels that he needs some backup to keep pace."

"Send them."

"Aff, Colonel. Is there anything else?"

"What would you think if we cut our contract with Steiner short, and moved to the Combine?"

"Why Colonel? We still have three years left in our contract with them. And it would take several moths to prepare to move at least, not to mention properly recalling our forces." He paused. "Minobu Tetsuhara."

"That's not your concern, but he did not deserve his punishment. Dismissed."

"Aff, Colonel."

GDI Compound
Port Krin, Antallos
19 November 3021

brox@gdi.mil said:

Minutes of Mercenary/Foreign Legion Meeting
Attendance

(HB) Burgess, Captain Hale (GDI Foreign Legion)

(AA) Al Azim, Major Aladdin (GDI Foreign Legion)

(AS) Staedele, Major Andreas (Buron Cavalry,
Mercenary)

(NF) Fischer, Natalie (Fischer's Freelances,

Mercenary)

(Br) Mechwarrior Brox (Fischer's Freelances,
Mercenary)

Minutes recorded by Mechwarrior Brox.

1402: Meeting called to Order by HB. Attendance taken. All parties present.

1410: Old Business

- Replacement Armor and Repairs to Mechs

- AS notes that Buron Cav is almost back to 90%, requiring ammo.

- NF reports Jolly Rogers at 100%

- HB reports GDI Foreign Legion at 55%, noting that GDI native forces have priority over Foreign Legion.

- HB reports that GDI Foreign Legion recruitment at over 500, most rejected on medical reasons. GDI has very high standards. Persons with personal 'Mechs that don't make requirements are referred to Mercenary Forces with other standards.

1459: New Business

- AS reports Davion attempt to recompense for lost materials

- Discussion ensues over this action. Conclusion reached that Davion is attempting to use this to gain inroads against the GDI by suborning Mercenary forces.

- AS and NF affirm long-term contracts with GDI as better offers.

- AA raises issue of Muslim/Islamic groups desiring passage to Motherlode due to religious reasons (Hajj). All agree to support that cause.

- Br reports that lessons for American Sign Language have started, with moderate attendance.

- HB reports that Variable Auto Cannons are due to arrive within a month in sufficient numbers to refit the Foreign Legion Command Lance, as well as native GDI forces. Ammo included.

- NF wonders when Fischer's Freelances can purchase V-A/C technology.

-HB reports that Medium Range Missile Technology
is ready for limited field deployment,
1423: Meeting Adjourned
[Click to expand...](#)
[Click to shrink...](#)

halebουργess@gdi.mil said:
Brox, the GDI doesn't have a Time Machine. The
meeting adjournment occurred at 1623, not 2423.
[Click to expand...](#)
[Click to shrink...](#)

brox@gdi.mil said:
Your mother wanted me to tell you that it didn't end
at 2423 either. ;p
[Click to expand...](#)
[Click to shrink...](#)

Earth Orbit over Austraila
Earth, Sol
January 21st, 2007

Captain Robert Beauford shook his head as he looked at the large cylindric hull of GDS Monitor as it lay between a pair of pylons of Freedom Station, currently shown on a large display.

Monitor was less than six month old and already going through a refit.

It was needed through. The Cobham armor that was layered over the outer hull was far from sturdy enough to try and take sustained fire from even a Jumpship, much less a combat rated dropship. By now the various companies that produced the Point-8 armor were producing it in larger batches and it was enough to replace Monitors eighty tons of Cobham with about one hundred fifty tons Point-8.

He turned around and faced the commander of Freedom Station, Comandant Francis Zola.

"When will you be finished?" he wondered.

"The replacement of the 155mm with the PPCs and the Otoberda with the Large Lasers is going to take more time than we thought," the French ESA officer noted and glanced at the display. "Not to mention our first try to build not only one but two ships completely in space."

Beauford looked back at the display and the other two docks next to the one occupied by Monitor. They both contained the currently basic hulls of the two Thunderchilds, Thunderchild and Tabiranth. He could imagine why the first was called Thunderchild, but the reason for the second ships name escaped him.

"How many engines are you using in them?" he wondered.

"Each gets three engines from the two Unions we could salvage from orbit," Zola noted. "Thankfully they took the nukes to the front and

that left the drive sections mostly intact. And the hydrogen tanks saved them from the radiation. They are little more radioactive than a normal nuclear plant in a submarine."

That got a chuckle out of Beauford. Hadn't been much different to the Monitors engine. Nothing a double layer of rad-shielding polyethylene couldn't handle.

"One or two Tridents?"

"One. We don't have enough space for more. But the designers still manages to squeeze in twelve Mavericks, two PPCs and four Large Lasers."

Beauford nodded.

Not bad for the jury-rigged space station building jury-rigged system monitors. At least he knew that these systems worked so far. Two month worth of trials in the Asteroid belt helped assuring that Monitor was able to dish out some long range hurt. Through they would need further tests once the PPCs and Lasers were installed.

He could already feed the excess heat from firing them...

Sol Nadir
GDS Monitor
December 20th, 2005/3021

The GDS Monitor had not been designed with grace in mind, but to an outside observer it maneuvered through space with a certainty of purpose that more than made up for that lack. The ship had seen several improvements since its initial shakedown cruise, but aesthetics had not been a high priority. Outside of a new paint job which was more binding foam and less paint, the ship was still a kludgy hodgepodge of mixed materials. But even the mightiest of battleships could trace lineage to the first testbed for technological development, and the innovations that GDI had made during the Monitor's construction were no different.

This evening, the Monitor was on patrol- she was rarely not. As a military vessel, she was equipped with a sizable array of sensor equipment- but as a modern military vessel she relied more on the feeds from the sensor satellites that now permeated local space. The Monitor couldn't be in more than one place at once- but she could certainly *see* more than one location at a time.

"There!" exclaimed Tezuka Minamo- formerly of the Canadian Reserves and now serving aboard the GDI vessel USS Monitor as a sensor technician. "That's definitely a sensor return!"

"A sensor ghost- it's just the K3-218 burning up," muttered her parter on shift, Maria Gertrude. She frowned. "Ahead of schedule."

"A satellite burning up in Earth's atmosphere causing a sensor ghost in the vicinity of Jupiter? I'm looking at a data feed that the Chandra is relaying to us, and-"

"Jupiter?" Maria replied. "Show it to me again."

Tezuka replayed the relevant data, pointing out several spikes across the spectrum. It could be a ship, or an asteroid with particularly high metal content. Or it could be a reflection off Titan, such things had become common in recent months. The farther outsystem the Monitor traveled, the more 'weird-ass shit' they encountered.

"Here, here, and here- three points of commonality," Tezuka said, gesturing to the spectrum analysis. "I think it's a ship."

"Maybe." Maria was a career cynic. "The returns aren't consistent enough to be a ship, and it's not moving like a ship. These readings are the readings of an asteroid. Nothing more."

"Maybe? Maybe I oughta-" and then Tezuka paused, eyes widening. "Maria!"

All discussion was forgotten as- much closer then distant Jupiter, space distorted and disgorged three ships. The flash of electromagnetic distortion- already being tracked across multiple sensor systems- was approximated to be at a set of coordinates just coreward of the Nadir. Whoever was jumping in was on their guard- by their position and the arrangement of vessels in a clear defensive line, they were clearly expecting some sort of defensive force at the Nadir point. Why else jump in close, but outside of the point?

Maria was already in motion, deft fingers lighting up the boards, and sending alerts. Across the ship crew rushed to their stations, even as the Night Shift gave way to the more experienced day shift. While military protocol dictated an even spread of officers by experience to ensure the ship was never caught 'pants down', the old naval tradition of a 'skeleton shift' had persisted. As dimmed lights shifted to a sharp red, so too did the ship awake from the lethargy of sleep.

For Petty Officer Edward Lambert, this was routine. While the two communication technicians began the process of alerting the crew, Lambert opened a private channel to Captain Beaufort apprising him of the situation. Once that duty was done, he opened the radio to shipwide.

"Attention. We are entering Condition Yellow. All hands, we are

entering Condition Yellow," he ordered. Condition Yellow- more commonly referred to as 'Yellow Alert' represented the standing of ready and preparation for potential hostilities, but not the outright declaration of such. It was an alert status, used when the ship found itself in a situation requiring caution, but not a fully fledged wartime scenario.

"All quarters, prepare for forward acceleration in thirty seconds!" Tezuka called, even as the Helm officer ran through pre-ignition checks. "All quarters, prepare for acceleration."

In space, there was no horizon to mark the distant ceiling, and no ground to mark a floor- but the terminology that had arisen from advancing across such boundaries continued to use it. Forward was forward, and up- relative to a bracing surface- was up. For the monitor, forward meant that the main engines would be firing- and soon.

Now.

Acceleration hit- in the real world there were no such thing as 'inertial dampers' that were science fiction was so rife with- acceleration hit like a punch, and it was only the Monitor's acceleration couches that prevented injury. On wings of fusion fire, the ship surged forth to intercept the unknowns.

The Monitor's Warbook- an enterprising piece of military software- was currently running through distant light spectrometry, analyzing contours and infrared readings in an attempt to match them to a listing of Sourcebook material.

The first identification was of the smallest ship, and it was achieved not through the sensory crunching apparatus of the Warbook, but from good old fashioned radio. The ship was the GDS Vittoria, and it had been transmitting an ident code which GDI had ceased using. A lot could change over the course of a year- GDI's changes had been

vast, and one such change had been the adaption of new encryption procedures, and new identity codes.

'Snowflake' had been billed as a scouting and limited retrieval mission. There had even been talk about how to handle contact with other such expeditions by other polities, but it was assumed that the sourcebooks were accurate, and that Snowflake would arrive and depart before any such contact. It's return to Earth with two other jumpships in tow- one more massive then anything GDI had yet seen- was entirely unexpected.

"They're transmitting us an update package. All the ident codes check out, save that they're nearly a year out of date." Tezuka acknowledged. *Who names an operation 'Phantom Snowflake'?*

If Tezuka had to pin anyone for knowing what was going on, it was Maria. Maria was a former technician from some high clearance navy project. She had been scouted by GDI for her exemplary management of sensor data, coding skills, and a cynicism that was unmmatched. Naturally, this meant she was privy to information far above what Tezuka had available- but even she had never heard of an operation named 'Phantom Snowflake', and would admit this to her friend later.

But in the meantime, Tezuka was still left with the question of was going on- and no one was telling.

ComStar, Ulysses & Unlce Chandy, Kester & Greig, Body in the Sand, Counterfeit, Poker

November 12, 3021

Hilton Head, Terra, Sol System

The Primus and the Precentor ROM eschewed the normal office meeting for one far more secure. They took a walk into a large greenhouse/garden where the ambient noise made any sort of recording impossible. That they were alone in there only added another layer to their security.

Julian Tiepolo reclined on a bench as he flipped through the briefing that the ROM head gave him. "These CSN people, and their military arm have caused quite the stir."

"Yes Primus. One could say that. The fact that there was a reporter in the HPG station during the battle enabled very fast coverage of the battle to be uploaded to the network, where the news took on a life of its own." The Precentor stayed standing until the Primus offered otherwise.

"We must have made a small fortune off the repeater fees for transmitting that data across the sphere." Tiepolo tried to figure out how many C-Bills that even a 5 second video clip that was transmitted to every HPG station in the sphere would bring in. It was a lot.

"Not as much as we would have thought of, sir. The Precentor Luthien authorized a mass transmit discount." The head of ROM shook his head. "He said that he felt it the prudent thing to do, given the subject matter."

Julian nodded. If there was a problem with the reporter, it would have already been taken care of, and so he didn't bother to inquire further. Nor was there a real reason to berate the Precentor for his actions. It was a good thing to make such offers to the public. It kept people trusting ComStar had their best interests in mind. Which they did, when one got down to the truth.

He flipped back and forth between a couple pages as he compared notes about something that gathered his interest, then moved on. "Be comfortable, Precentor. From the way the public and some of the House heads are reacting, one could come to the conclusion that they are the second coming of Kerensky and his lost forces."

Taking a seat, the ROM leader indicated the file. "It is woefully inadequate to our needs. They are as hard to infiltrate as the Dragoons. But as to that concern, various agencies have asked that exact question, and they quite firmly deny any connection. He have no reason at this point to doubt their denials. Although there did appear to be some confusion from the reports when they were founded. Some indicate that they were a deep Hegemony colony, while others believe they date back to the First Exodus."

"This. This I do not like." Julian tapped a section of the report, and the Precentor leaned it to see what caused the leader of ComStar concern. It was a copy of a notebook that was transmitted from Antallos, penned by a MIIIO agent. In it, it described the world called Motherlode or Third Earth, and it was very familiar. "What do your people think of this?"

"Primus, it is the opinion of our analysts that this was part of a major disinformation campaign on the part of the CSN - one designed to make their world appear defenseless, but quite valuable."

"But Terra..."

"It seems as though after the arrival of the Darkon and their pirates, they, the pirates, were quickly co-opted into the CSN and GDI. Note the presence of one Hale Burgess in their forces, nominal second in command of their new Foreign Legion. It seems as though the return of that force, along with their tale was all a ruse to gather forces to try and 'conquer' Motherlode. They walked right into a trap."

"As for the use of Terra itself, even as it may have appeared in the early Age of Space, we can only assume that they used historical records for the creation of this information, and altered it to make the world seem more appeasing to the carrion worms on Antallos."

Julian let go of a deep breath. "Send a very strongly worded letter to this Coalition. Inform them that I am offended by their use of Terra in their plots, even if they were a lost colony."

The Precentor ROM nodded. "I doubt you will get much more than an apology."

Julian agreed. "Very true. But the manner in which they reply will be useful information." He flipped through some more pages. "It seems like the Combine is offering to the CSN a minor mech parts factory."

"That is correct, Primus. It does not make any arms or armor, but we have vague reports that the CSN is feeling out offers to the Federated Suns and the Outworlds Alliance. They seem to be interested in Fusion reactors and Energy weapons."

"I do not like the idea of yet another faction seeking weapons of warfare." The Primus shook his head sadly. "I recall some mention that the factory in question - there was some violence about its closure." He sighed. "I do hope that there was no sabotage to delicate parts. It would be such a blow to their relations."

The Precentor took the blunt hint. Privately, he had already made arrangements for such a contingency, but also recognized that the Primus was less delicate about such things than he liked.

"Two more things, then I think we are done with this subject for now. First, send a message to Precentor Antallos. Inform him that we are upgrading his station to Class A."

The ROM head made a note of that. He already had a plan in mind for which agents to send as part of the upgrade. He recalled the suspicions of one Adept Mulligan Fox last year, and his correct theories about Earth may prove useful if he was deployed in a position where he could get more information first hand. And be surrounded by loyal protectors. "Secondly?" he urged.

"Send another message to Third Earth. Ask them, quite politely of course, if they would allow us to take over the operation of their HPG

station. It would allow them to interface properly with the rest of the network."

The Precentor had a reservation about that, and voiced it. "Primus, it may be that Motherlode is outside the 50 light-year radius of normal HPG communications. To enforce that offer, we would probably have to build at least one new HPG station simply to serve this Periphery world. And what if they possess more than one world, each with their own HPG station? We run the risk of trying to take over a network already in place."

Very few people could contradict the Primus of ComStar, but the Precentor ROM was one of them.

"Star League Colony or not, we need to bring them back into the fold. It will be worth the expense." With that, the Primus dismissed the Precentor, and stayed to relax, surrounded by the lushness of this part of Terra before returning to his duties. First thing, find out when the Precentor ROM had decided to start lying to him.

December 30, 3021

Chirala, Draconis Combine

Tai-sa Ulysses Kurita drank deeply of the offered tea. He was officially overseeing the packaging of the factory, and its loading onto the dropships. Across from him, his host was perusing over the necessary paperwork. "I like this blend. But I cannot recall having partaken of it before."

Chandrasekhar Kurita took another sip himself. The near 30-year old businessman was unlike many of the other members of their extended family. He had quite the business sense, and less the instincts of a warrior. There were rumors that Takeshi Kurita was getting fed up with the antics of 'Uncle Chandy' and was ready to exile him from the court. "I procured this blend from the Third Earthers on Antallos. I felt that such a purchase would help me in some manner. I'm not quite so sure now."

Ulysses nodded. It was a fairly bland blend of tea. But he had already committed to liking it, so he finished the cup without asking for a

refill. "How much longer do you think the loading will take?"

"Another week or so. We wish to maximize the packing, as well as make sure your mechs are available to walk right off the dropships on Antallos."

"Excellent. I presume you will be coming with us to oversee the business ends of this deal?"

"Of course, Cousin. I look forward to meeting these Third Earthers myself."

"Don't be so hasty. It is two jumps to Suianheer, then another two to Antallos. Even if we left now, it would be at least a month before our arrival."

"True, true. Plenty of time to learn more about them."

December 04, 3021

Luthien, Draconis Combine

Warlord Grieg Samsonov walked beside Warlord Kester Hsuin, his face contorted into anger. "This is unacceptable! Antallos borders the Galedon district! I have forces on New Samarakand!"

"And the Coordinator has heard your complaints, Warlord. I even apologized for the breach of etiquette my actions in driving after Redjack Ryan caused." Hsuin was far more composed than his nominal equal. Samsonov was only recently promoted to his current position as Warlord, a post less than three years old.

"I will take this battle to them myself!" Samsonov kept going, barely registering the protests of Hsuin. "I can bring forces to bear on these GDI dogs, and take them to heel within a week!" Already he dreamed of taking the hidden secrets of the Motherlode Lostech from them, and using them to further his own power.

Hsuin glared. "Compose yourself Warlord! Listen to your own words; dare you defy the Coordinator so openly? He would have your head for even trying!"

Samsonov spat on the floor, but his voice was hushed. "Has he lost his edge? Has his teeth worn away? We are in prime position to take that world, and add it to the glorious Combine."

The Peshct district Warlord shook his head. "There is a time and place for such things, Grieg. But now is not either. Allow me to explain. When we first became aware of the Global Defense Initiative, you recall what they were doing? Of course you do. They were fighting - and quite successfully, the forces of Redjack Ryan - a pirate who sacked worlds across the Combine in his vain glory search for plunder and lostech.

"He got, for his troubles, one of the most complete deaths in the history of the Inner Sphere. The GDI then proceeded to deliver death and destruction to pirates, mercenaries and the other dregs of society with such alacrity that they gained the attention of the entirety of the Inner Sphere.

"And now, you would propose to attack them, to take from them their world that they liberated, and by all accounts, are turning it away from a festering hole upon humanity?"

"Of course! What ever they have done, we can do! I am a Warlord, and I will show them the proper might of the Dragon!" Grieg made no effort to hide his convictions.

"Then you would fail." Kester's voice grew the same metal used in Battlemechs. "Do you know who leads the GDI?"

Samsonov paused. What was Warlord Hsuin getting at? "General Don Davis."

"Excellent. Now, who is the second in command?"

"Tony Dansel." Grieg answered after a moment's thought. After all, it made perfect sense for the best Mechwarrior to also be a leader of the men.

Kester stared at Grieg incredulously. "NO YOU FOOL!" his voice

raised to the roof, attracting the attention of some nearby attendants. They promptly realized they had other places to be, and left the two Warlords to their discussion. "KURITA! The second in command of the GDI is Tai-sa Chou Kurita! You would attack a member of the Dragon's family - even one long separated? One whom our beloved Coordinator has invited for a personal audience? KNOW YOUR PLACE!"

The leader of the Pescht District looked ready to hit his equal, but refrained from doing so. There was a limit to be recognized. Grieg, for his part, was stunned into temporary silence, and Kester rallied without giving him a chance to defend his actions, the warlords voice no longer yelling.

"They are loved by the common people for their actions. Piracy and the like are down over 50% in your district alone, although I suppose that you never considered that. If we attack them, we will seem to be no better than any of the other barbarian successor states. They would gladly croon to their own peoples about how we attacked such honorable peoples, to our own dishonor.

"Thus, the Coordinator, in his wisdom, is extending the velvet glove of friendship, and peaceful coexistence with this Periphery power. We protect them, and we can gain access to their lostech. Eventually, they will see the benefits of joining the Combine willingly, and they will be welcomed with open arms. Do. You. Understand?"

"Yes, Warlord Hsuin." Grieg gave the outward manners of an apologetic man, but in his mind, he had consigned the GDI to the same level as mercenaries. They had insulted him, and must be laughing at him for what they thought his foolishness. He would return the favor to them. Not right away, no. That would be to soon. But eventually.

02 January, 3022
750km North West of Port Krin, Antallos

Remus felt sorry for the poor infantry. He was safe and comfortable in the cockpit of Bob's vintage Carbine-4 IndustrialMech, while engineers and other workers were out in the sands placing markers

and taking measurements.

They were salvaging off of a really old battlefield, one with kilotons of mechs in various states of damage - from legs blown off all the way through to at least two instances of a fusion reactor exploding. For some reason, the GDI infantry referred to such instances as a '*Stackpole*'. He did not yet have the chance to ask about the source of that colloquialism.

The foreman waved at Remus and he set his mech into motion, moving to the line drawn in the sand, and lowering the lifting arms. The figures below him scrambled about, setting attaching clamps to the vague shape of the battlemech still buried under the sands.

Another signal, and the foreman repeated the order over the radio for the record, and Remus began to lift the salvage from its battleground burial. As his mech groaned under the weight, the internal combustion engine roared in appreciation of the challenge. For a moment, the balance between forces was held, but the works of man proved superior to nature.

"Oh, Great Father." Remus whispered in awe as a shape began to emerge. A quick glance showed that yes, his radio was not in transmit mode. The GDI had the amazing ability to eavesdrop on other communications while keeping theirs secret.

The blocky shape of the humanoid mech was revealed by falling sands to be a venerable *Orion* battlemech. He lifted the mech clear of the sands, the gentle wind erasing the weight of ages.

His eyes caught sight of something though the shattered remains of the cockpit, and slammed the emergency button on his mech, stopping the engine, and raising the ire of his foreman. "Remus! What happened?" The voice of Joseph Riggs came tiny from the radio as Remus picked it up.

"There's a body in the mech." He replied as the sand was wiped away, revealing to his eyes the Star of Cameron emblazoned on the chest of the Orion.

* * *

Sergeant Ryan Opel stood on the chest of the battlemech careful to sidestep the Star in respect as a civilian engineer and the pilot of the WorkMech pried open the shattered cockpit. He had been summoned when the reports of a body had come in, and now he stood back while access was granted. Remus and Riggs worked in silence as they found the latches to pop open the damaged section of the mech, and they quickly did so.

A slosh of sand fell out, and Sgt Opel gestured a medic forward while the Army Chaplain attached to this salvage expedition waited for confirmation. The Medic gave some instructions, and the two civilian contractors shoveled out sand with gloved hands and a small trowel.

Quickly, the desiccated remains of the mechwarrior emerged from beneath the sands. The medic nodded to the chaplain, and from behind the sergeant, last rites were read aloud.

* * *

Remus had been summoned to help extract the body, and he shook in apprehension, his eyes casting towards the symbol of the Star League that just shone at him like a beacon. Thoughts of the Great Father, Alexander Kerensky and his favored mech made him feel slightly sacrilegious at what he was doing. But logic countered that this was an old battlefield, and as he and Riggs, under the direction of the medic, moved the body from the cockpit to a waiting stretcher, he considered the horror of dying where no one would ever know.

No, this wasn't a bad thing, he decided. It was a good thing.

He, Riggs, the Medic and the Sergeant each took a corner of the stretcher, and carefully made their way down the length of the mech to the legs, where they could better dismount. A ground car waited for them there, one of the ones painted with the red cross that universally indicated a medical vehicle.

Remus also saw that all work in the area had come to a stop, and that the small procession was lined on both sides with military and

civilians who showed their respect to the unknown warrior.

He helped load the body into the waiting groundcar, and was about to turn back to his job when the foreman tapped him on the shoulder. "Go with them Remus. They got a couple questions for you. I'll take over for you until you get back." Remus nodded, and got into the groundcar.

As they drove back to the work camp, Remus watched as the medic began processing the body, removing sand and debris, talking into one of those lostech recording devices as he did so. Once he asked the Wolfnet agent to help move the body so he could get underneath it, but soon the ride was over and Remus was taken to see one of the GDI overseers.

He was asked some perfunctionary questions, nothing out of the ordinary. At the end of it, he was asked if he had any questions himself. Not wanting to miss the chance, he did have one. "What's going to happen to the body?"

The Captain nodded, understanding the weight of the question, even if for the wrong reasons. "GDI policy is that in the cases where we do recover the body of a soldier is to try to return it to the nation to which they represented, assuming such a thing is possible. Given the previous history of the Combine sacking this world, we've actually returned 5 bodies to them in the past couple months. As for the unknown whom you helped recover, the situation is less clear. The Terran Hegemony no longer exists, and ComStar isn't their true successor state. We don't have ID on him yet, and likely never will, so the option of returning him to his family or homeworld is closed off to us.

"Therefore, once all other options are exhausted, we will bury him as though he were one of ours. Full honors and all." The captain paused for a moment. "And yes. We do that for anyone."

Remus was at a loss. That the GDI would go to such lengths for mechwarriors was beyond the call, normally they were buried on the planet, unless special arrangements were made, but to actively try to...

His personal opinion of the GDI increased, and so did his professional one.

12 October 2006
Zurich, Switzerland
Earth, Granville Cluster

Some of them wondered if they were back in prison, others didn't wonder. They were led past security that would put world leaders to shame, being checked three times for their identity through different systems.

As they filed into the room, many of them recognized each other. If not by face, then by reputation. They quietly took their seats as the guards about the room stayed at attention. Any attempts at talking were shushed. They had all been warned that using people's real names here would be one of the worst things they can do.

On the hour, a short man entered. Behind his back, he was called "The Gnome". In front of him, he was "Sir". He had chained to his wrist a nondescript black briefcase. The people around the table shuffled uncomfortably.

"Gentlemen. Ladies." The Gnome nodded at each in turn. He put the briefcase on the table, and one of the guards produced a key that was fitted to the lock. With a snap, the burden was released, and he put the briefcase on the table, where he opened it up.

"I have here ComStar Letters of Credit, commonly known as C-Bills, in denominations up to 100." He started to pass some of them around to the people around the table. They examined them. Touching, seeing, smelling and even tasting. "We have been asked to make more."

10 January, 2007
GDI HQ, Port Krin, Antallos

Over the past few months, the military governorship of Port Krin had solidified. In between getting the infrastructure up to the standards of

a second world nation - a concept revitalized by the media and pundits from its Cold War heritage to describe the potential development of the Inner Sphere. It wasn't the same as the First/Second dichotomy of the past, but rather a more purely economic measurement.

But that development meant that more and more attention was placed on Port Krin, and the areas surrounding it. For the first few weeks after the battle, the GDI had patrolled the perimeter, locking horns with smugglers and other types of people who thought that it was business as usual in the Port, despite the change in leadership.

They were proven wrong. Sometimes at the end of a barrel, sometimes in the military courts, while others simply found that the business they depended on no longer existed.

But all this meant more paperwork. And it was this paperwork that Colonel Chou Kurita was glad to set aside when a lieutenant came into his office with a different set of paperwork. The Colonel read it, then wished he was a General. At least then he could legitimately have alcohol in his office for times like this.

He re-read the proposal, then leveled a gaze at the helpless officer before him that could be rated as a mech-scale weapon. "You want to start an international poker tournament."

"Yes sir. Given the success of similar ventures back on Earth, some of the men and I felt that sponsoring such an event here on Antallos could help raise our public profile. We still have problems with public perception, and many of our infrastructure projects are months, if not years away from completion, then longer for the benefits to come from that."

Kurita took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. There was some logic to that. "Seed money?" He asked. As an officer, he wasn't unfamiliar with such things. Indeed, the idea did tickle at his mind.

"We actually got some money from Dansel, and apparently Mechwarrior Brox is also interested, and is prepared to invest."

"Dansel." The word was somewhere between a question and a flat statement.

"Yes sir. It wasn't his idea, but he did agree that such an event would be good for us." The officer stiffened up even more.

"Have you run this by the PR department?"

"Not yet sir. We wanted your opinion first."

"Get it past them, then I'll have a look at it. Dismissed." The lieutenant saluted, recovered his papers, and left. Chou waited for one full minute in silence before opening one of the drawers on his desk, pulling out a deck of cards, and began to shuffle it. "Better get some practice in then."

You're going to hate me for this, but I've decided to do some peer review.



"And the Coordinator has heard your complaints, Warlord. I even apologized for the breach of etiquette my actions **is** driving after Redjack Ryan caused."

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I believe that in this instance, "is" should be "in".

The Peshct district Warlord shook his head. "There is a time and place for such things, Grieg. But now is not either. Allow me to explain. When we first became aware of the Global Defense Initiative, you recall what they were doing? Of course you do. They were fighting. And quite successfully. The forces of Redjack Ryan - a pirate who sacked worlds across the Combine in his vain glory search for plunder and lostech.

"He got, for his troubles, one of the most complete deaths in the history of the Inner Sphere. The GDI then proceeded to deliver death and destruction to pirates, mercenaries and the other dregs of society with such alacrity that they gained the attention of the entirety of the Inner Sphere.

"And now, you would propose to attack them, to take from them their world that they liberated, and by all accounts, are turning it away from a festering hole upon humanity?"

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Change "They were fighting. And quite successfully. The forces of Redjack Ryan - a pirate who sacked worlds across the Combine in his vain glory search for plunder and lostech."

to

"They were fighting--and quite successfully--the forces of Redjack Ryan; a pirate who sacked worlds across the Combine in his vain glory search for plunder and lostech."

Also, remove the quotations before 'He got' and 'And now'. Since its just one long speech, I believe that adding them in the middle is redundant (and rather gives the impression that someone else is talking in the Peshct Warlord's stead).

Kester stared at Grieg incredulously. "NO YOU FOOL!" his voice raised to the roof, attracting the attention of some nearby attendants. They promptly realized they had other places to be, and left the two Warlords to their discussion. "KURITA! The second in command of the GDI is Tai-sa Chou Kurita! You would attack a member of the Dragon's family - even one long separated? One whom our beloved Coordinator has invited for a personal audience? KNOW YOUR PLACE!"

[Click to expand...](#)

[Click to shrink...](#)

Is it just me, or would that "KNOW YOUR PLACE" line look *really* good in italics?



For some reason, the GDI infantry referred to such instances as a Stackpole. He didn't have the chance to ask about the source of that colloquialism.

[Click to expand...](#)

[Click to shrink...](#)

This doesn't flow quite right. Recommend altering it to the following:

'For some reason, the GDI infantry referred to such occurrences as the reactor 'Stackpoling'. He didn't, as of yet, have the chance to inquire about the source of that peculiar colloquialism.'

Úlfur

Alpha Canis Minoris

July 13th, 2010

Craig Anderson looked up into the blue sky of Úlfur, his eyes following the two bright flares of fusion drives. He followed them for a few long moments before glancing back down and over the Keflavik Flats from his lookout on top of Dimmuborgir Hill.

The virgin Kleifarvatn Sea was facing to the north, a large beach lining the shore.

The currently small town of New Reykjavík was sitting right at the shore of the single ocean of Úlfur. Three large buildings in the west of the town in a small secure bay, each housing a single 1000 MW fusion reactor would provide more than enough energy for years.

The pair of fusion flares got brighter and he could hear the sound of rapidly displaced air as a pair of modified Mule person carriers went down on the final approach to the small space port of New Reykjavík, carrying the second group of about four thousand colonists and their families from every nation of Earth. They would increase the number of people on Úlfur to about fourteen thousand after a See Bee battalion had built up the core infrastructure and the first wave had ten thousand colonists about a year ago.

Most of the places that were known of Úlfur might have been named by an Icelandic geologist who had been in the survey crew, but until now, not a single Icelandic citizen had moved to become a colonist. From what Craig knew, it was too warm.

Graig turned around and looked down Selfoss valley and the small military base placed there for the protection of the small beginning colony. It was not much more than a company worth of soldiers. An armor company, an artillery company, a logistics company, about twelve GM mechs, that currently went to work as industrial mechs and a squadron worth of fighters. Selfoss Military Base also housed the sole HPG and two Black Boxes of the colony for increased protection of the valuable communication equipment that provided

communication with Earth.

He chuckled lightly as the sound from the two Mule dropships ceased, signifying that they had landed. The new colonists would find that everything that was said about Úlfur was true.

Large fertile tracts of land right next to New Reykjavík, large deposits of ores only about a hundred miles away and an ocean that was full of life. It was a dream come true for many of the colonists. Some would literally disappear for weeks until they came back to notify the local government where they had build their small homestead.

All in all this colonization effort, the first real one outside the Solar System since Earth had learned about the ISOT, had the markings to become self sufficient fast. The CSN Settlement Department only had to send that one factory.

Reuters

Rome, 06/05/2006. In the Pentecost mass at St. Peter, Pope Benedict XVI today officially created the dioceses of Luna and the archdiocese of Antallos, which also covers the neighboring Inner Sphere. The diocese of Luna will cover everything in the Sol System that isn't inside earth's atmosphere.

While the bishop of Luna is still to be determined, Josip Bozanić, former bishop of Zagreb and chairman of the bishops' conference of Croatia, was named as the Archbishop of Antallos. Joseph Zen Ze-kium S.D.B, Cardinal of the Roman Curia will become Nuncio to the CSN government on Port Krin.

The pope did send members of all catholic orders and laymen that want to visit the inner Sphere for mission, education or health care into the sphere on an official mission and allowed them to wear a badge of a white dove, which is only handed out after a registration in Rome. Registration is possible at www.vatican.va as of today, and will be needed to get a place in the dropships that are transporting those ambassadors of the Holy See.

But the main struggle about dogma remains, as the church is still preparing an encyclical to address the difficulties of finding itself in a Universe with two Romes. Every preparation for contact with alien life have been proven useless as sourcebooks say there are no aliens in charted space and no one even thought about a second Earth diverging centuries after the passion of Christ, let alone after the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican.

Rumors about the Swiss Guard ordering BT weapons and massive amounts of paint which coincidentally would be enough to paint several heavy mechs in the color of the guard uniforms made by Michelangelo have been firmly denied.

#####

Slashdot.org

November 10 2006

2003-founded IBM System and Technology Group, a group consisting of IBM, AMD, Chartered Semiconductor Manufacturing, Freescale, Infineon and Samsung, today announced the development of a

production process for microprocessors, RAM, graphics cards and anything else a computer system needs in compliance to MIL-PRF-38535G and other international standards relevant for spaceflight.

If possible, it will be included in the standard SOI-45nm-technology and anything afterwards. The other top priority in the development of this process will be energy efficiency.

IBM chairman Samuel J. Palmisano expressed his hope for a fast development of global and stable defense and spaceflight technology standards.

Even so, AMD announced the production of a somewhat refitted K5 with an integrated memory controller and 2D-only GPU. The memory controller will only support ECC-RAM, which should drastically reduce server prices in coming years as the market share of those modules rises.

Intel, NVidia, TSMC, VIA, Sun and other big IT companies are already developing production process technologies like that, so that the IT industry will now put parts usable for spaceflight and military needs into the low-end mainstream market.

OLPC strongly supports the idea and proposed a new series of systems at the low-end market using this technology*.

IBM, Microsoft, Sun and several start-ups are already trying to create an operating system usable for citizens of the inner sphere. At least 16 different Linux distributions trying to do the same thing have been spotted. Meanwhile, SAP released a new version of the new Interstellar Government Module now in closed Beta test at Port Krin.

#####

Slashdot.org

November 10 2006

Today, Sir Richard Benson of Virgin Galactic said in a press release that he would continue his research into a private spaceflight sector, as "the inner sphere clearly shows what it means to use technology you don't understand. We are willing to incorporate BTech materials and equipment into our plans, but only as long as my team

understands and can explain the technology. We might even have fresh ideas to improve it a bit.

While copy and paste is a viable strategy for the short term, it isn't acceptable in middle and long term."

This statement is strongly supported by the international research, aerospace and spaceflight communities that already fear budget cuts because of the centuries worth of research data in the Star League Caches.

*:resulting in what we know as "netbooks" today.

Royal Palace, Tharkad City
Tharkad, Lyran Commonwealth
January 03, 2007/3022

"You're going to hurt yourself."

"I will not." 11 year-old Melissa Steiner replied, giving Misha Auburn a quick glance up from the soldering tools she held in her hands and the circuit boards she had 'acquired'.

"If you hurt yourself the Archon will be angry," Misha stated, worry on her young face. "Not to mention my father will kill me."

Melissa let out a tired sigh at that statement made by the dark haired girl who was also 11 years of age. Misha was her best friend, really the only friend she had in the entire Royal Palace who was her own age, but sometimes Misha could be a real worry-wart. It didn't help matters that Misha's father, the Royal Court's historian, was a rather demanding and strict parent who only ever seemed to be happy when cataloging the numerous books and data indexes that made up the Royal Library and Archives or composing facts and evidence for one of his new historical treatise. However, she couldn't fault Thelos Auburn too much. It was through his assistance, somewhat unknowingly on his part, that she had found the books needed to attempt her latest project.

"I won't hurt myself so long as you don't jostle the board, now hold it still," the young Archon-Designate nearly demanded as she looked to the green silicon board that she had been attaching various metal pieces of circuitry to.

Looking rather nervous as she held the latest project that her friend had begun developing Misha bit her lip before saying, "I don't know about this...."

"Oh, come on," Melissa remarked, a bit anxious as she wanted to finish her task and see if her planning had born fruit. "I gave you a pair of the insulated gloves I got from one of the techs down in the palace maintenance bay."

At that Misha looked down to the heavy, gray gloves that she and Melissa both wore. The gloves were supposed to guard against burns and electrical shocks and were often worn by techs working on vehicles and Mechs. However, on the two skinny 11 year-old girls the gloves appeared immense, reaching up to just past their elbows, and were rather cumbersome for their small hands. When she had first seen them Misha had thought them to be the hands of the legendary literary monster created by a scientist named Frankenstein.

"Just hold it steady while I...", the young blond Archon-Designate spoke as the slight hiss of solder was heard. "There we go, all done. Now we just need to let it cool a little before testing it."

Moving away from the finished circuit board and taking off her heavy gloves Misha let out a sigh of relief as her best friend moved over to a black box the size of large shoe box. She was truly beginning to worry about her friend. Why couldn't they just do like they did before, running to the kitchens for sweets, reading good books selected from the library, pointing at the different men in the Royal Guards and giggling as they talked about which one looked the cutest or most handsome in his ceremonial dress uniform and then blushing madly and giggling even more when said man happened to look over at them with curiosity plainly apparent on his face. Oh, to return to such simple things and not have to deal with all the wires and gadgets that Melissa had suddenly developed a fascination with.

"What are you supposed to be building again?" the young, dark haired girl asked her blonde friend.

"I told you before," Melissa spoke up as she took off her own gloves and then opened up the box to reveal a few other electrical components. "It is an adapter to hook my DS up to the holo-player."

"Yeah, but I guess I mean 'Why' are you building it?" the daughter of the Court Historian asked. "You're the Archon-Designate, you could just ask for one or for someone else to make it for you. Why did we have to go to all the trouble gathering everything so you could make it yourself?"

"Because," the 11 year-old blonde girl responded, as if that simple word explained everything, before moving back over to pick up the circuit board she had finished mere moments ago.

Shaking her head of shoulder length hair Misha felt her curiosity at the fantastic piece of lostech her friend had been gifted winning over her sense of caution, "So you think this will actually make it so we can play 2 Player together on a few of the games?"

"Once we get the controllers finished it should," the Archon-Designate answered as she slid the circuit board into the slot she had crafted in her device for it. "But first I need to apply the program to the memory module."

Nodding as if she understood, Misha watched attach a few cables to the device. She wasn't stupid, though she was no where near the almost genius level of intellect that Melissa had. The dark haired girl just couldn't wrap her mind around all this technology stuff that her friend had suddenly developed an interest in. No, she preferred books and history, something which pleased her father immensely.

"Alright, here we go," Melissa stated as she flicked a switch on the side of the box.

With that the few small lights attached to the box began to come to life, signaling power was indeed flowing through the device. Seeing he lights and hearing the slight hum created by the electronics Melissa Steiner let out a cheer at her success so far. Even Misha found herself smiling at what the two of them had been able to accomplish. However, just as quickly as the device had begun to apparently function, a few sparks began to shoot out as electricity crossed circuits. Before either girl could step back or attempt to switch off the device a loud '*Pop*' sounded as a small cloud of bluish-grey smoke was released.

"Aaaaah! It's on fire!" Melissa screamed, more out of concern for her device than herself.

"Put it out!" Misha began to scream, pulling the skirt of her dress back in order to avoid having it catch any of the sparks that still

sporadically shot out of the now burning machine.

"With what?" Melissa yelled back, more worried that she was about to lose all the hard work she had just put in rather than about the danger the fire posed to her and Misha.

"Use a fire extinguisher!" Misha yelled only to receive a rather wide-eyed look in return.

"I knew there was something I forgot to get!" Melissa suddenly spoke, snapping her fingers as the thought hit her, just as Misha's eyes went even wider in panic.

"Girls? Highness? Is everything al-...", the voice of one of the maids suddenly came through the door to one of the outer rooms of the Archon-Designate's apartments. "Wait...what's that smell? Is that...?!"

Hearing the voice of her maid and how it suddenly trailed off Melissa cringed just as a shrill klaxon began to resound.

"Uh-oh," the young Archon-Designate muttered, hearing the fire alarm loudly sounding.

The small utterance was barely out of her mouth as the Royal Guards who had been stationed outside of the young heir's apartment came bursting in. The first pair, a stern faced man and woman, had pistols drawn seeking out any potential enemy while the second pair, two women, grabbed the 11 year-olds and whisked them out of the room, past the other rooms that made up Melissa's apartment, and out into the hallway of the palace.

"We are in so much trouble," Misha whimpered as tears began to fill her eyes and run down the rosy cheeks of her face.

Melissa said nothing to her friend. The young Archon-Designate was far too caught up in her own thoughts, trying to figure out what had possibly gone wrong and being thankful that she had not hooked the DS up to the device but rather kept it safely in a special security box.

**First Circuit Meeting Room, ComStar Compound
Hilton Head, North America, Terra
January 03 2007/3022**

"I call this meeting of the First Circuit of ComStar to order under my authority as the twelfth Primus of ComStar since the founding of our Blessed order by Jerome Blake himself and the embodiment of Blake's Will and Vision for all mankind," Julian Tiepolo spoke, his voice crisp and clean as it rang off the great marble walls of the chamber reserved for the highest members of the interstellar order.

"Blessed be the most holy Blake. Blessed be his vision for all mankind," the five Precentors of the First Circuit intoned in response to the Primus's words. "May we be tireless in our efforts to fulfill his goal for humanity, may we be unflinching in our resolve to do what is necessary to maintain the Light of Knowledge in these dark times, may we be always be willing to sacrifice ever piece of ourselves in order to see the preservation of the Blessed Blake's divine word.

"So let us all be, forever and ever," the Primus finished as the Precentors bowed their heads, their faces concealed by the cowls of the heavy crimson robes that they wore denoting their station as members of the First Circuit. "May the Peace of Blake be upon you Precentors."

"And upon you, Primus," the gathered members replied in unison.

"Now let us discuss the business at hand," the rather thin man wearing the heavy gold-cloth robes of the Primus spoke. "As many of you are now aware, given the reports that Precentor ROM has compiled, there is a new power emerging from the Periphery; these so-called... 'Motherloaders' and their CSN and GDI. I have sent out instructions to...."

"Pardon my interruption Primus," Myndo Waterly, Precentor Dieron and representative of ComStar's presence in the Draconis Combine said as she lifted her cowl to expose her delicate oriental features and fair hair, a uniqueness that separated her from many of the other Japanese and Asian descended people who had born in the Combine.

"But the matter of these 'Motherloaders' is most disconcerting."

Looking into the shining eyes of the woman who had been one of his greatest students, a true treasure for the fulfillment of the Blessed Blake's Vision, Julian Tiepolo held back the derisive sigh that he wished to utter. Despite the...affection he felt for his erstwhile apprentice, the Primus knew that she hid a forked tongue in her mouth and had the knowledge to use it in such a way that would make any devil proud. Shuddering slightly as he recalled past... sessions in which Myndo had used her tongue to her utmost in the attempt to convince him to take more dramatic action, Tiepolo knew that though the discussion was beginning with the normal amount of politeness and deference it would ultimately end as it almost always did, with him having to chastise her and put her back into her place.

"Ah, Precentor Dieron," Julian officially recognized the woman who had deigned to speak, silently hoping that she would for once remain civilized throughout the entire meeting. "Yes, I understand you have...concerns regarding the plans that you and our fellow brethren have been briefed upon. Indeed, I vividly recall the rather long missive you had delivered to my office in regards to the matter. However, if you would permit me to explain the plan myself then I believe the majority of your concerns shall be laid to rest."

Biting her lip to stop herself from delivering a snappish rebuke, Myndo Waterly nodded her head saying, "I trust in the wisdom of the Blessed Blake, Primus."

Around the room the other Precentors of the First Circuit did not miss the backhanded insult that their sister had just given to the leader of their order. However, seeing as the Primus had not shown any sign of having noticed the slight, the members remained silent. They all knew that Waterly seemed to enjoy pushing the boundaries of decorum and her authority. If the Primus wished to put her back into her place, he would do so himself or indicate for one of them to reign in their more than slightly obsessive sister.

"Now as I was beginning to say before being interrupted," Julian Tiepolo stated, staring down his aquiline like nose at Precentor Dieron, "A plan has been set into motion to begin dealing with this

unforeseen occurrence. Having consulted with Precentor ROM, who has gathered all the facts, data, and rumors that are presently circulating regarding these 'Motherloaders', I have authorized the upgrading of the Antallos HPG to a Class A station. This has been done to both deal with the increase in message traffic that is likely to occur due to the presence of the 'Motherloaders' GDI and to facilitate the expansion of our ROM presence upon Antallos without drawing any undue suspicion."

"Pardon my intrusion Primus," Ulthar Evertonson, Precentor Tharkad, interjected. "But having read the reports compiled by ROM and the plans laid out by both you and Precentor ROM are we to understand that the primary purpose of the ROM agents stationed on Antallos will be to both monitor and learn the secrets of these 'Motherloaders'?"

A smile nearly broke across Julian Tiepolo's lips as he heard the question, but he schooled his features before it could possibly be noticed. Ulthar, along with Huthrin Vandel, Precentor New Avalon, were his two most fervent supporters on the First Circuit. Unlike his other student, Myndo Waterly, Ulthar and Huthrin remembered exactly who it was that had not only instructed them in the true path of the Blessed Blake, but also who it was that had elevated them to their current positions. Ulthar's question was the perfect setup for the explanation and furthering of his plan.

"Indeed, since ROM's core mission is to be the eyes, ears, and dagger of our blessed order, that is partially the case here," the Primus stated, nodding his bald head ever so slightly. "However, in addition to their more...traditional orders, the agents placed on Antallos carry a second set of orders. They, in keeping with our benign image, are to convey our greetings to the leadership of this 'Motherload'. Upon doing so they will deliver a personal message from me to the 'Motherloaders'. This message shall welcome the people of 'Motherload' with the promise of peace and friendship. It shall also request that ComStar be allowed to takeover the operation of any and all HPGs currently in their possession."

"To help integrate them into the interstellar network, correct?" Ulthar posited, knowing full well that was what the Primus had been getting

at.

"Of course. Now in addition to taking over their HPGs we will, in our magnanimous grace, also offer to the 'Motherloaders', access to the Inner Sphere that they have been so greatly denied," Tiepolo calmly spoke. "We shall assist them in peacefully learning about the universe they have, until recently, been cut off from."

"All the while showing them the evils of the Scavenger Lords," offered Huthrin Vandel, the Precentor New Avalon, using one of the more civilized slurs associated with the rulers of the Great Houses as he lowered the hood of his robe. "In the end they will see that their only hope for peace and safety lies in our capable hands."

"Quite," the Primus stated, pleased that his other loyal protégé had so eloquently iterated the main goal of the plan, "And in their realization they shall turn to us and we shall help them protect their lostech secrets from the predations of the Successor States. In the end ComStar will gain a bastion of faithful followers, control of the 'Motherloaders' technology, and continue to ensure the balance of power. Our mission to preserve technology and help awaken humanity to the peace and blessings of Blake's Word shall be one step closer to fruition."

Standing there at his central podium, the Precentors of the First Circuit arrayed about him as the points of the star emblazoned upon the floor, Julian Tiepolo felt the peace and calmness of Blake flow through him as his plan was accepted and.... The sound of clapping, steady and mocking, broke the peace that the Primus had so been enjoying. Looking to the source of the disturbance the aquiline face man saw that they came from the person who was becoming an ever present thorn in his side. Oh how he so greatly desired to strangle the life from her at times.

"Bravo. Bravo indeed," Myndo Waterly spoke up with a superior smirk upon her face and sardonic tone in her words. "Yes, I can see it now, just as you promise, these 'Motherloaders' shall fall quickly and quietly into line. Why I do believe that they will be so overwhelmed by your *greatness* that they shall build great stone idols of you to worship and offer heathen sacrifice to."

Pushing down the anger that threatened to boil up in him Primus Julian Tiepolo asked kindly, "Is there something you, in your *vast* wisdom, wish to add Precentor Dieron?"

"Oh, but you are doing so well. I would hate to crush your naïve dreams so easily," Myndo retorted, not bothering to hide the bite in her tone. "Do you honestly believe that it shall all go so easily? That the people you speak of shall be so easily overawed and welcoming of Blake's Peace?"

"They have been out in the cold for quite a long time," Ulthar Evertson interjected. "They will need guidance and assistance should they not seek to fall to...."

"And I suppose you would be an expert upon *The Cold*, Precentor *Tharkad*, seeing as how the vast majority of Lyrans dismiss Blake's teachings outright and view us as little more than over important messengers," Myndo stated knowing it to indeed be true. "How do you think these 'Motherloaders' shall view us? They do not revere technology or fear its loss as they have apparently never lost it."

"Now that is not entirely known to be true....," Huthrin Vandel tried to offer, "...we do not entirely know the origins of these people. Precentor ROM and the Primus have...."

"Yes, yes. I've read their suggestions and rumors of the origins of these people," the fair aired oriental woman snorted derisively. "Even if it is to be believed that they are, at best, a lost Star League colony, that still does not absolve the fact that they, unlike the rest of the Inner Sphere, have never had their industries bombed into nothing, never had their universities and centers for learning burned to the ground, nor have they ever experienced the true horrors of the Succession Wars and had their spirits broken by them! They will not simply accept things as they are, no, mark my words they will foolishly seek to make their own way and in doing damage the balance we have so long striven to maintain."

Only finding fault in her rude tone and not in the possibilities of her words, Julian Tiepolo waved his hand to halt both Ulthar and

Huthrin before either could launch a verbal riposte and then began to speak, asking, "And what would you propose instead, Precentor Dieron? How would you have us approach this situation?"

"I would release the ComGuard and ROM to bring these 'Motherloaders' back into the fold or see their world burn for their insolence!" the fiery tempered woman spat causing the other Precentors, even the normally silent Precentor Atreus and Precentor Sian to gasp in shock and horror.

"You do not know what you speak of!" Huthrin Vandel accused, pointing a stern finger at his Combine counterpart as spittle flew from his lips. "The ComGuard are one of our Order's most closely guarded secrets! They have only been used in the most desperate times, when it appeared that one of the powers of the Inner Sphere or Periphery was going to unearth or resurrect a piece of technology that would be devastating to its neighbors and to mission of our most holy Order! To send them out now, against a world that we know not the location of and whose representative have gotten the attention of the entire Sphere upon them is sheer, utter lunacy! You would threaten the neutrality of ComStar and the balance of power we have so carefully maintained across the whole of the Inner Sphere just to see one world burn?! Madness! This is Madness, I say!"

"Madness? This is the Will of the Blessed Blake!" Precentor Dieron screamed back at her cohorts. "Look at what there GDI has already been able to accomplish in such a short span of time! They are now the sole power and controller of Antallos even if they do say that they shall let it remain a 'Free Port'! Their technology, oh their technology...! Using their technology they destroyed three times their numbers in a single multi-day battle! They have brought with them lostech that even we would find difficult to match! It is outrageous! For such technology to be in the hands of...of...an upstart Periphery world is.... It is unconscionable!"

"Calm yourself Precentor Dieron," Primus Julian Tiepolo solemnly intoned as he stared down the impassioned woman who was the source of the outburst. "I assure you that we shall not allow these 'Motherloaders' to grow beyond our means for controlling them. As was explained earlier, steps are already being taken to ensure that the

Will and Vision of Blake are not disrupted by this unforeseen circumstance."

Standing behind the podium granted to her as a member of ComStar's First Circuit Myndo Waterly was resplendent in the red robes that marked her office as she stared holes into the bald head of the Primus. However, Julian Tiepolo paid her little heed as he stood there before her and the other member of the First Circuit in his great golden robes much like a bright golden phoenix amidst a group of crimson cardinals. Truthfully Julian had considered just the sort of actions that Myndo now proposed. However, he had dismissed them as being too overt and dangerous in the vein of trying to maintain ComStar's face of peace and neutrality and in trying to keep the vast secrets that the Order hid from the Scavenger Lords. Besides, why destroy a brand new piece when it could be added to his side of the board? If these 'Motherloaders' refused to be his knights then they would simply be his pawns. ComStar did after all have in its possession the large stockpile of Weapons of Mass Destruction that the Star League had left in their hidden depots on Terra's most holy surface. It would not be the first time that an appropriate miracle needed a helping hand in order to inspire faith.

"Steps? Please *enlighten* us all as to how exactly these...*Steps* will help, since *I* have already explained how they are nothing but folly!" the clearly oriental descended woman snarled, her fiery temper complimentary to the color of her robe as she backed down only slightly in deference to him. "Your so-called *Steps* are almost the same exact ones you have proposed in dealing with the relationship forming between Steiner and Davion! Mere Talks! How does this benefit ComStar and help spread the enlightenment of the Blessed Blake to them? These talks that you encourage between Steiner and Davion have only helped to marry devil with damnation! What if they were to seek to merge their two realms together? What then '*Oh Wise Primus*'?"

"Do not be absurd Myndo," Huthrin Vandel suddenly remarked, Ulthar Evertson nodding in agreement with his colleague. "Such a thing shall never occur unless we facilitate it. And *that*, ComStar shall never...."

"What? We shall never allow it?" Myndo openly scoffed. "You give our dear, *former* teacher too much credit Huthrin. If Steiner and Davion should come together in such a fashion then it will create a super power the Inner Sphere has not seen the likes of since the fall of the Star League. Mark my words; such a thing would not only be detrimental to ComStar's mission, but a death knell for the rest of the Inner Sphere. Even our *glorious* Primus, in his *infinite* wisdom, can see that."

Looking to the woman he had once considered to be his apprentice, the Primus fought back the urge to reply just as fiercely as the accusations and insults had been levied at him. What stopped him was the small, quiet reminder that he was the Primus, the embodiment of the Blessed Blake's Word amidst the chaos and depravation born of the petty squabbles of the Successor Lords. He was to be calm and collected, however that didn't mean he would simply stand by and be insulted by his subordinate. No, he was the embodiment of Blake's Strength and Wisdom and Myndo needed to be reminded of her place in Blake's Great Plan.

"As you know *Precentor*," the Primus stressed the title, indicating his displeasure at being question, yet remaining calm as ever. "In the effort to maintain our image of neutrality and peace it has been the official policy of ComStar to encourage communications between the Successor Lords. That being the case, as Steiner and Davion talk we have of course helped steer their peers towards their own set of talks. Should Steiner and Davion seek to work together to dominate then Inner Sphere they will find Marik, Kurita, and Liao aligned against...."

"Spare us this naivety!" Waterly rudely interrupted, seeming not to care that she had once again insulted her superior. "An alliance between Marik, Kurita, and Liao is a pipe dream and nothing more. Liao and Marik have been at each other's throats for years due to the free Worlds League's conquest of a number of Capellan systems over the centuries. Even now Janos Marik blames Maximilian Liao for inciting Anton Marik's rebellion, an accusation we all know to be true. Kurita on the other hand looks down upon everyone with their usual samurai arrogance, which Takashi Kurita embodies to his very core."

"I do believe you over exaggerate the matter Precentor Dieron," Huthrin Vandel, the Precentor of New Avalon, interjected.

"Indeed," Ulthar Evertson, the Precentor of Tharkad, added in agreement. "Kurita, Marik, and Liao may not put aside their differences but should one of them be attacked by a Steiner-Davion alliance, rest assured that the other two will strike at the vulnerable backs of the aggressors."

"Ha! Never shall those three get along enough to stand against the combined might of a Steiner-Davion Alliance, even if it is in their own best interest. And yet you still encourage and help facilitate these...*Talks*. Foolishness I say," Myndo scoffed at her colleagues. "No, the only way to deal with this situation is to kill it in its cradle before it can even hope to begin to mature."

"And in doing so tip our hand to the rest of the Successor Lord's?" Vandel proffered mockingly. "You have made this argument beforehand with the university and research facility that Hanse Davion has been constructing upon New Avalon. As was foretold by the Blessed Blake, ComStar shall lead the rebirth of humanity from the ashes of the fires set by the Successor Lords. All we need be is patient and work from the shadows as we always have."

Pinning her colleague a glare that would have reduced him to ash if her eyes had been the lenses of lasers rather than the fleshy, dark orbs that they were, Waterly strongly countered, "I know well the Saintly Blake's teachings Huthrin, as well you know! However, the mere university and research facility that you speak of has been tasked not with simple education but rather the rediscovery of lostech. We can not sit idly by as Hanse Davion and his Federated Suns gain advantages that will allow for the easy conquest of his neighbors! To allow even the smallest amount of lostech into his hands will bring doom to the Inner Sphere!"

"Which shall be in keeping with the Blessed Blake's Prophecy," Evertson interjected calmly. "Let Hanse Davion wage his war and seek his lostech trinkets. The candle that burns brightest burns quickest and like such a candle Davion will wear himself and his

nation down before he realizes it, making him easier prey for his enemies to feast upon and leaving the Federated Suns in a darkness that only the light of ComStar will be able to illuminate."

"You underestimate Hanse Davion, Ulthar. With Steiner at his side Davion will be stronger than any of you realize. Such strength shall only increase should he be allowed to gain the lostech he so desperately desires and which we, the members of ComStar, are sworn to protect," the Precentor Dieron remarked sharply. "And what of these 'Motherloaders'? These...Periphery upstarts that have somehow gained access to legions worth of lostech. To allow them to proliferate would be a sin against the Vision of Blake."

"As I stated earlier," the Primus calmly and coolly spoke, though his patience with his former favorite was being pushed to its limit. "Steps are being taken to deal with them and like a shepherd with a lost lamb we shall guide them back to flock."

"And if they should join with Davion instead?" Waterly challenged. "Such an occurrence would be not just a sin but pure blasphemy against the Vision of the Blessed Blake! But then maybe that is what you desire? Is that what you have become Julian Tiepolo? Are you a blas-...."

"You! You would dare say such words?! And to me of all people?!" Tiepolo thundered, his patience spent, the final word of Waterly's accusation dieing in her throat before being fully uttered. "You forget yourself *Precentor!* I, not *you*, am *Primus!* I am the living embodiment of Blake's Will! To challenge *Me* in such a way can be considered *heresy* itself!"

Beneath the angered, hawkish gaze of Primus Julian Tiepolo, Myndo Waterly felt herself shrink ever so slightly as the fury of the Primus was leveled solely upon her. Strong and fearless in her conviction she had danced on the line numerous times but now she had not just danced on the line. No, this time she had not only crossed the line but left it miles behind her. Looking around the room Myndo could see her fate written out plainly before her. Evertson and Vandel had never been allies and now carried looks of sweet victory. Shifting her gaze towards the Precentors Atreus and Sian, she found them with

their heads bowed and the cowls of their robes up making the impossible to read. Though she would normally count the Precentor Atreus amongst her supporters she was not fool enough to believe the rather pious believer of Blake's Vision would side with her now. Even if she did have the support of the Free Worlds League representative it would matter little, what with Precentor Sian being an old friend of Tiepolo and loyal like the little lapdog that he was. No, it was over. Like Icarus before her she had deigned to fly too close to the sun and like Icarus she had brought on her own demise. Any moment now the Primus would call for a vote of excommunication, a vote she knew that she couldn't possibly win. After that the ROM agents would enter and...well she dared not think of what awaited her with them.

"Precentor Dieron," Tiepolo's voice was like a gunshot, shattering the dreadful silence that had descended upon the gathering of the most powerful members of ComStar. "Your accusations are a serious concern, so much so that they would be considered unforgivable. By all rights you should be excommunicated for the words you have levied against me and against the teachings of Blake."

Bowing her head, Myndo tried to hide the feelings of shame, embarrassment, and fear that were evident on her face. She thought about appealing for mercy, but decided that if she were to find her end her she would meet it with as much dignity as she could possibly salvage from this debacle.

"You were once my student, my prized pupil in learning the ways of the Blessed Blake," the Primus stated, his voice firm and solemn. "As your teacher I remember well the fire that filled you as you expressed your conviction in the Blessed Blake's Will."

At those words Myndo raised her head only enough to look towards her former mentor. Confused she wondered what the man was getting at. Did he seek to prolong her suffering for the insult she had laid against him?

"As Precentor Tharkad so apply noted earlier, 'the candle that burns brightest burns quickest'. Your fire, it seems, has not only continued to burn but grown exponentially," the golden robed man remarked as he looked upon the red cloaked woman who had been his student. "It

would seem that you need to learn to better control your fire...."

Hearing those words and the way the Primus suddenly paused Myndo felt her eyes widen in shock. So surprised was she that she missed the rather shocked looks worn by Vandel and Evertson. Just what was the old man planning? Did he want her to beg for forgiveness?

"Precentor Dieron," Tiepolo stated in a commanding voice. "It would seem in your zeal to see the Blessed Will of Blake be carried out you lost control of your senses. As such, for the next 30 days you shall retire to your quarters here at Hilton Head, during which you shall fast and meditate upon the meaning of Blake's vision and how best to serve it. You will meet with me personally every day and I shall instruct you and guide you in your...*quest* for understanding and enlightenment. Others will take care of your duties as Precentor Dieron until I believe that you are fit to resume your duties. You are dismissed Myndo."

Bowing at the waist in a fashion that was more akin to her former life in the Draconis Combine, Myndo Waterly, remained bowed as she backed away from the circle that was the First Circuit. Only when she was near to the doors that were the only way in and out of the room did she straighten up. However, even then she kept her head bowed in a sign of both chastisement and submission. She knew that Vandel and Evertson were probably seething over the fact that she was being given a second chance. However, their ire was not what concerned her at the moment. No, what bothered her was how she had been addressed. Tiepolo had called her Myndo. He had used her first name in her chastisement, not Precentor or even her family name of Waterly, and the oriental woman recognized exactly what that meant.

As she made her way silently to her quarters Myndo Waterly, Precentor of Dieron, made two promises right then and there, swearing to Blake himself that she would see them fulfilled or die in the attempt. The first was that she would not only regain her position and authority, but surpass them by gaining the seat of Primus for herself and in doing so show them all the '*True Vision*' of the Blessed Blake. Second, she would not submit herself to Julian Tiepolo as she had done many years ago when she had been but a young acolyte in

training and he being a Senior Precentor, had convinced her that the best way to serve the Blessed Blake was by serving him with her heart, mind, and...*body*.

"No, Julian Tiepolo," Waterly silently whispered to herself. "I will not make such mistakes again and when all is said and done you shall rue the mistakes you have committed as I ascend to my rightful place as the Primus who shall see all of humanity accept the Blessed Blake's Vision."

Royal Palace, Tharkad City
Tharkad, Lyran Commonwealth
January 03, 2007/3022

"So what do you have to say for yourself young lady?"

Standing before her mother in the private office reserved for the Archon, Melissa Steiner chewed her lip in a sign of embarrassment and worry. This wasn't the first time she had been brought to her mother in order to be disciplined, however such times were rather few and far between. Even so the stern visage that the ruler of the Lyran Commonwealth presented was just as intimidating as the two Griffin Battlemechs that flanked the throne in the Royal Throne-room. It didn't help any that poor Misha was standing next to her looking ready to collapse into a ball of tears as Misha's father, Thelos Auburn, looked on with a grim façade.

"Well?" Katrina Steiner, Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth, asked as she stared across her great oaken desk at her 11 year-old daughter.

"Um...Oops?" Melissa offered hopefully, before cringing at the critical and un-amused look her mother gave her. "I'm sorry. Please don't punish Misha. It wasn't her fault; I roped her into helping me."

Leaning back in her chair Katrina put her hands together in front of her as she took on a look of contemplation. She wasn't too surprised that Melissa would seek to take the majority of the blame in the effort to absolve her best friend of any wrongdoing. Indeed, the two

girls were so close as to be almost considered to be sisters, with Melissa having been growing into the role of the elder sibling now for the last two years or so. Thinking upon this Katrina prepared herself to speak, but before she could say anything the sound of someone clearing their throat drew the attention of those present to the third and final adult present in the office. Landgrave Simon Johnson, the head of the Lyran Intelligence Corps, had been present earlier but exactly for what reason Melissa was unaware. However, right now the young Archon-Designate felt like she could kiss the older man as he had just taken much of the tension out of the room by focusing the attention of everyone present onto him.

"You have something to say Simon?" the Archon questioned, a small knowing gleam in her eye.

"If you would permit me Archon," the Intelligence Head responded courteously, before continuing after receiving the slightest of nods from his sovereign. "Melissa, I am curious as to what you were attempting to do when the...incident occurred earlier."

"I...well that is to say...," the young blond 11 year-old began, but fumbled slightly before deciding that her mother and the head of the LIC probably already knew and were simply waiting to see if she would tell the truth. "I was trying to create a device to work as an adapter between my Holoplayer and my DS."

"Oh," the Head of the LIC commented, "And how were you going about doing so?"

"Well...I," Melissa began before pausing, "I read about it in a book that I requested from Herr Auburn."

At the mention of the Court Historian and Archivist the attention of everyone in the room turned to the now slightly befuddled man.

"Melis-, I mean, the Archon-Designate inquired about books in the archives regarding computers," the historian stated rather nervously, "Per your orders regarding her education, My Archon, I had already provided her with a book detailing the basics of computers, their functions, and components. When the Archon-Designate came to me

she said she had finished that book and so I gave her a new one that was a bit more advanced and discussed some of the theoretical abilities that computers possessed at the time of the Star League. But seeing as how old the book is I made her keep it in the archive so that it wouldn't be accidentally lost or damaged."

Feeling her mother's gaze swing back to her Melissa explained her escapades further, "I didn't take it out, I just copied down some of the things I found interesting, like the diagram of the adaptive memory transfer module on page 305 and the circuit boards on pages 306-311."

"Why did you copy those particular diagrams?" the Archon asked as she eyed her daughter.

"Well I read the passage describing it and the type of computer it was supposed to interface with and...well my DS seemed really similar when I opened it up and looked at its insides," the blond 11 year-old explained. "I thought that maybe if I could make one I could get my DS up on the Holoplayer so Misha and I could both play at the same time. Some of the games have what are called multiplayer modes and special adventures that can only be accessed by...."

With a wave of her hand Katrina cut off her daughter, as the young girl was beginning to speak a mile a minute about the little pieces of lostech that had been gifted to her. "Why did you seek to build it yourself? Why didn't you just come to me and ask to see if something like that could be built?"

Looking between her mother and Simon Johnson, Melissa slowly replied, "Well...it's just that you've been very busy lately with meetings, especially with Herr Johnson. I didn't want to bother you over something that is considered a...."

"A toy?" the Archon finished, gaining a nod from the young girl in return.

"Yes. I looked through the books and took notes word for word. It was a little tricky hunting down some of the pieces and components that I needed but....," Melissa trailed off before quickly continuing, "I

was just turning it on to check that power was properly running through it and then, maybe, load the programming to the memory module. But that's all, I swear! I didn't think it would short out like that! I followed my notes and the diagrams in the book exactly! Theoretically...it should've been fine."

"Hmm," Katrina hummed as she digested her daughter's sincere explanation. "Theoretically doesn't matter. If things had been different then it could've worked perfectly...or it could have been much worse. You could've electrocuted yourself or Misha or the both of you. You could've accidentally released toxic fumes that could've blinded the two of you or worse. Then there is the fact that you started a fire and had no way of putting it out. You're lucky that the alarm sounded and your guards rescued you and Misha before things potentially got any worse."

Lowering her head and chewing her lip at the reprimand Melissa readied herself for whatever punishment her mother saw fit to hand down. All that she hoped for was that Misha would at least not be as severely punished.

"First, you shall assist the janitorial and maintenance staff in cleaning and repairing the damage to the room in your apartments," the Archon began as she addressed her daughter. "Next, you will be grounded from playing with your DS for the next month. You will assist the cleaning and maintenance staff for that same period of time in maintaining the entire area around you apartments. You will dust, you sweep, you will mop, you will vacuum rugs, you will take out trash, and you will carryout any other duties that are assigned to you by the head maid and head butler. Misha, shall join you and work alongside you for the first two weeks."

Melissa let out a sigh of relief at that. At least Misha would be spared somewhat. Looking over to her friend the young blonde 11 year-old saw that the dark haired girl still looked ready to breakdown and cry in sheer terror and humiliation at having been brought before her mother, the Archon herself, for punishment.

"Pardon me, My Archon," Misha's father suddenly interrupted. "I believe that he leniency that you have shown Misha is unwarranted.

My daughter is of the age where she should know right from wrong and recognize dangerous situations, or at least that is what I thought. That she did not come to anyone when things began to look dangerous nor did she convince her friend that what was being attempted should be done under the proper supervision tells me that the lessons I thought she knew now need to be relearned. I believe that allowing her to work by the Archon-Designate's side for the full month's time will help her to remember such lessons next time."

Katrina nodded her head in acknowledgement of the words spoken by her Court's Historian. Thelos Auburn was a rather prim and proper man. He was perfect for bringing the discipline and structure needed for much of Melissa's education in academics. The thing that Katrina found both slightly funny and slightly annoying was that despite having known the man for the last twelve years of her reign he still referred to her formally even in private situations such as this. Really, the man needed to loosen up sometimes.

"If that is what you wish then I see no problem with it," Katrina remarked, deciding to speak with Thelos about his undue formality at some later time. Turning her attention back to her daughter the elder blonde spoke once again, "And lastly, as for the collection of electronics and tools you have been collecting and storing in your room.... They shall *all* be turned over to the Palace technicians and returned to their proper places. Your rooms are not some grungy repair shop; they are those of the Archon-Designate of the Lyran Commonwealth and must reflect accordingly."

The young 11 year-old blond felt herself slump as her mother said the last part. That was worse than any other part of her punishment. She had worked so hard to put together her little collection of electronic gadgets, gizmos, and widgets.

"However...", Katrina continued, "If after the time period of your punishment is over and you still wish to tinker with and learn about computers and the like then you will be allowed. But, you shall do so under the careful supervision of someone of *MY* choosing and in a place more suitable to dealing with any unforeseen...accidents. Do I make myself clear young lady?"

"Yes Mother," Melissa replied quickly, surprised and rather happy that her mother would allow her to continue with her new found interest.

"Very well, then you and Misha are dismissed. Thelos, will you make sure they find their way back to help the members of the staff repairing Melissa's room?" The Archon asked as she shifted he gaze to her loyal Court Historian.

"Of course My Archon," the prim and proper man replied before courteously turning and escorting the two 11 year-olds out of the office.

Waiting a moment or two after the door had closed and latched, Katrina Steiner turned her attention to the one other person who remained in her office besides herself.

"Well?" the Archon asked as she looked to Simon Johnson.

"Melissa has become rather surprising," the head of the LIC responded.

"Heh, that she has," the blond haired woman noted with a short laugh before taking a more somber tone. "The guards and staff made me aware that she was gathering up her little collection and going down to the maintenance bays to talk with the techs, but I had no idea that was taking this hobby of hers so far. I should've sat down and talked with her about it, but things have been.... I've just been so busy these past few months and...."

Simon Johnson nodded in understanding. As the head of the LIC he was keenly aware of the schedule the Archon kept and these past few months had been even busier than usual. There were the three skirmishes with the Draconis Combine along the Tamar-Rasalhague border that needed to be addressed. Then there was the Archon's pet project, her attempt to bring the other Successor Lords to the peace table in order to solve the centuries of fighting and finally end the Succession Wars. So far only House Davion and its Federated Suns had been receptive to her efforts, which were now beginning to culminate in the two nations sharing intelligence on their mutual

enemies and exchanging officers from their Military Academies and some of their elite units. Another thing that had taken up part of the Archon's already busy schedule was the sudden appearance of a periphery world on the other side of the Inner Sphere that was abundant with lostech. Normally Simon would've dismissed such a thing as being nothing more than rumor and the ramblings of pirates and fortune seekers who had either spent too much time out combing the depths of space or were lost in their drink, perhaps even both. However, what he couldn't dismiss were the pieces of losttech equipment and electronics that suddenly showed up on the black market, Melissa's DS having been one of them along with several 'computers' that were now being dissected and studied by the best minds in the Lyran Commonwealth. He, and the Archon herself, had begun paying even more attention to the rumors about this 'Motherload' after he had received a report from the few agents he had stationed on Antallos and ComStar had made a Inner Sphere wide broadcast of the Davion news reporter who had witnessed the battle that had taken place on the pirate ridden world. These 'Motherloaders' currently had much of the Lyran High Command in an uproar as reports were read and reread and the few holos taken of the battle were played over and over to try and gain further insight into the battle prowess of the GDI and their seeming abundance of lostech military equipment.

To add to the list of problems were the rumblings of rebellion in the Isle of Skye, but then there were always rumblings of rebellion in that bothersome little part of the Commonwealth. However, what made the situation different this time was the fact that Duke Frederick Steiner via his friendship with Aldo Lestrade, the Duke of Summer, was connected to the latest rumors of rebellion.

Frederick was a cousin to Katrina and had served with distinction in the 7th Lyran regulars before transferring to now command the 10th Lyran Guards. However, his leadership of the Guards, while excellent, carried with it certain political implications seeing as unit that had traditionally been commanded by the Steiner family member that was most likely to become Archon, indeed Katrina herself had commanded the unit before being given command of the 2nd Royal Guards and then being transferred to a command role in the Strategy and Tactics Division of the Lyran High Command. Frederick had also

been one of the favorites to succeed Alessandro Steiner as Archon before Katrina had carried out her coup and gained the support of the Estates General. Overall, Frederick was an excellent military leader but when it came to politics he was decisively out of his element. No, any political moves that Frederick made were more than likely directed by Duke Aldo Lestrade of Summer, a slimy political eel and major womanizer. Simon didn't have the proof he needed yet, but he would have bet all the Kröner he had to his name that Lestrade was seeking to manipulate Frederick into trying and usurp the throne from Katrina.

"Did you know that I was worried that she was becoming too insulated and maturing too quickly, what with how bookish she was?" Katrina suddenly spoke, breaking Simon from his thoughts regarding the potential trouble that was on the horizon. "Other than Misha she doesn't come into contact with many others close to her own age. Other than her studies and events and activities I had designated for her she was not branching out and exploring very much. I'm actually a little glad that she has developed an interest in something that I did not necessarily handpick for her."

Giving a slight nod Simon watched his Archon lean forward to pick up a picture from the corner of her desk. It was one of the few private pictures she kept out in the open here in her private office and was actually the only one that was an actual printed photograph and not holographic. While he couldn't see the actual picture in the old brass frame due to where he was sitting he still knew exactly whom it showed.

Letting out a small sigh the Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth appeared more like a regular person than a mighty ruler at that moment just as she began to speak again, "Seeing her curiousness and want to be self-reliant reminds me so much of Arthur. He gave her strengths she is just beginning to awaken. Heh, he always did have a love for lostech and tinkering with equipment."

Hearing the name of the Archon's late husband and knowing that the picture she now held was one of the few taken of him before he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, Simon Johnson nodded in agreement before saying, "If I may be so bold My Archon, she also

gets many of her talents and strengths from you as well. You and Duke Luvon created a young lady who, Gott willing, may turn out to be one of the strongest and greatest Archons the Lyran Commonwealth has ever been blessed with."

"Thank you Simon...", Katrina replied, reaching up with her free hand to wipe away the tear at the edge of her eye as she set down the picture. "Now there was something else you wanted to say in regards to this little incident before getting back to our original meeting."

"Yes My Archon," the head of the LIC answered. "I found young Melissa's answer to what she was trying to build rather astounding. As you are well aware, we were able to procure a number of other electronic devices that, like Melissa's DS, originated from the planet referred to as 'Motherload'. One of the problems that our scientists have been having in fully utilizing many of the devices, particularly the devices that have been identified as being computers, is the inability to integrate any of them with the similar technology we now have beyond utilizing what one of the scientists called, 'a rather crude patchwork of circuits, cables, and chewing gum'. As such a number of the scientists were suggesting to look at the theoretical literature regarding Star League era computers and their interfaces to see if a more proper integration system could be developed to maximize the abilities that we are seeing in the various devices. In particular, one of the methods slated to be attempted is...."

"The method that Melissa attempted by herself?" Katrina finished, a look of disbelief on her face as she realized that Johnson was not joking. "Mein Gott...how did she...?"

"Indeed, that is what I am wondering myself," Simon calmly stated as mentally he began to go over how the security system surrounding the various projects would need to be checked for any leaks.

"I always knew...I mean...well, Melissa has always been smart for her age," the Archon stated, still rather taken aback.

"The last time Melissa was tested she showed an IQ just a few points below the level considered to genius," Johnson noted as he mentally recalled all the specifics and ran them over again to make sure he

wasn't mistaken. "If she is showing such aptitude now.... Well, there will need to be serious discussions regarding how you wish to proceed with her future education. However, before you make any decisions I would make the suggestion that her security detail be at least doubled and that a number of the old personnel be replaced and that the replacements be taken from Loki."

"Loki?" the Archon stated rather surprised that her head of Intelligence would suggest using the division that was both secret police and state-sponsored terrorist. Katrina herself had bad memories of Loki, particularly how under her uncle Alessandro the fanatical agents had tried to kill her and then relentlessly hunted her, Arthur Luvon, and Morgan Kell until she had been able to depose her uncle and take over the Archonship. "Why them? Aren't the guards she has now recruited from the best of our military?"

"Yes they are, but the members of Loki are fanatical in their loyalty, Archon. As you very well know, we recruit agents to Loki by taking orphaned children who have no family left at all. We then proceed to teach them and train them in nothing but how to be the best at covertly striking fear into the enemies of the Lyran Commonwealth," the LIC head remarked, knowing full well just how brutal Loki agents became because of the near inhumane training they were put through, but deigning it so be a necessary evil due to the agents having a fanatical loyalty to the Lyran Commonwealth. "I know that you have had...poor experiences with Loki in the past but I assure you that I only suggest this in the best interest of the Archon-Designate. I have also identified several LIC agents and a few members of both the 1st and 2nd Royal Guards whom I believe to be members of Heimdall. With your permission they could also be recruited for the task and placed in positions to oversee many of the Loki agents."

Katrina sat in silence for a moment as she contemplated the suggestion. She knew Loki and personally loathed their brutality. However, now that she was Archon instead of the commander of the 10th Lyran Guard she saw the need for such operatives even if she still did not fully approve of them. Heimdall on the other hand was a different matter. For the longest time she, like many in the Lyran Commonwealth, had believed that Heimdall and its members were

the true terrorists and that Loki operated so brutally inside the Commonwealth in order to route out such terrorists. However, during her own flight from Loki and her subsequent rise to the position of Archon she had learned the truth regarding Heimdall. Heimdall was in fact, an unofficial department and in some ways an internal affairs safety valve for the LIC. Formed by agents of the LIC who had considered themselves patriotic Lyrans unwilling to accept the massive collateral damage that often resulted from Loki-operations, the members of Heimdall worked to curb the aggressive and brutal tendencies of the fanatical members of Loki in so far as in actions taken against Lyran citizens. It was because of the sacrifices of Heimdall agents that she, her future husband, and Morgan Kell had been able to escape the clutches of Loki long enough to bring an end to the repressive and destructive rule of her uncle Alessandro. In fact she had the sneaking suspicion that Simon, a loyal agent of the LIC whom she had promoted to the head of the LIC after asking her uncle's handpicked man to 'step down', was indeed a member of Heimdall. However, she had never asked and most likely never would. Simon Johnson was loyal to her and the wellbeing of the Commonwealth, and that was all that mattered.

After contemplating the idea for several minutes Katrina finally asked the question that had been at the forefront of her mind, "Why this sudden change in Melissa's protection detail? It can't simply be because she's begun showing aptitude for computers?"

"At first, no, but now it simply reinforces what I had already come here to speak with you about," Simon stated as he pulled a medium sized envelope from inside the left breast of his suit's jacket. "We recently received this information from Quintus Allard as part of the agreement that we have regarding information sharing between the Commonwealth and the Federated Suns."

Taking the envelope Katrina opened it and took out the paper messages that lay inside.

"The messages came via the special couriers we have set up between the LIC and MIIO. I deciphered the message myself and no one has seen the deciphered message other than myself, Allard, and Hanse Davion," the head of the LIC stated as he referred to his and his

sovereign's FedSun counterparts. "I will admit that the information that Allard and Davion convey is both intriguing and...troubling."

Katrina Steiner, Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth, could only nod her head as she began to read through the beginning of the deciphered documents. She wasn't even through the first page and already she could see what had captured the attention of her intelligence chief. The words *lostech* and '*Motherload*' along with the acronym *GDI* stood out almost immediately. However, just as interesting as those were, another word stood out in particular... *ComStar*.

MIIO Headquarters
Avalon City, New Avalon
Crucis March, Federated Suns
16 January 3022

"So, you've completed the research project I assigned you?" Quintus Allard asked.

"Yes, sir," the young woman replied. Kym Sorenson was young, intelligent, beautiful, and from the nobility. In other words, she was a near perfect new recruit for the MIIO, bright with promise and youthful enthusiasm. The project he had assigned her was ostensibly her 'written final exam', and not an analysis of a possible enemy. It wouldn't do to have people – especially political enemies – thinking that he was taking silly rumors seriously. "It was fascinating... but not exactly what I expected when I joined up."

"In our profession, Miss Sorenson, one must learn to deal with the unexpected all the time," Quintus observed. "However, I'm glad you enjoyed the work. It won't always be the case."

"Of course, sir," Sorenson said.

"Now, why don't you tell me what you've learned?" Quintus asked.

"Of course, sir." She opened her briefcase and pulled out a rather thick binder – it must have been stuffed full with a stack of paper around five to ten centimeters thick – and dropped it onto Quintus' desk with a hearty thunk. "Here's my full report, sir, a full analysis of the political and technological situation of early Twenty-first Century Terra."

"Good lord!" Quintus muttered as he flipped open the binder and flipped through the table of contents.

"I'll admit that it's a bit much, sir," Sorenson said nervously. "But I did have four and a half months in the Palace Archives to put it together and thought I should do a thorough job. In some ways, Terra of a thousand years ago is every bit as complicated as the whole of the

Inner Sphere today."

"Yes, yes, well done," Quintus reassured her quickly. Meanwhile, his mind was searching for the names of analysts to examine this document. He certainly didn't have the time to personally read all this! "Ah, perhaps you can summarize?"

"Oh, of course, sir," she said, relaxing in her seat. "Please keep in mind that most of the documents we have in the Archives are second and third hand sources that often refer to older texts that we don't have. Some of them even show an obvious bias by the writers, but reading between the lines, I think I managed to get an accurate picture of the time period."

"In our trade, sources may not always be reliable," Quintus observed. "Go on, please."

"A thousand years ago," Sorenson began, "humanity was of course all confined to one planet, fusion power was just being invented, and space travel was done expending absurd amounts of chemical fuel to toss ships on ballistic trajectories to other worlds. And for much of the century prior to that, Terra had been dominated by two rival power blocs instead of the five we have today." She looked wistful for a moment. "In some ways, this era was actually more a Golden Age than the Star League."

"Oh? How so, Miss Sorenson?"

"I know everyone says that the Star League was the pinnacle of human development, and in some ways it was," Sorenson told him. "But the twenty-first century was when humanity changed from a planet bound species to an interstellar one. It was a time of dizzying change. Technological advancement proceeded at a pace that was pretty much never matched in later eras, even by the Star League. Every technology perfected by the Star League was invented in some form or another during or before this time period: holographic matrix computers, fusion drives, KF drives, even the Industrialmechs that would later be turned into Battlemechs. Trust me on this, sir. I did the research in depth and I don't think our archived literature of the time does more than hint at what it was truly like."

"Ah, so what were the politics of the time like?" Quintus asked.

"Hard to say, sir," Sorenson answered, frowning thoughtfully. "I'm not being facetious. It's just that the early years of the Twenty First Century was a time of major political change. The Cold War had ended with the Russian Civil War that eventually drew in the Western Alliance. In 2014, the Western Alliance emerged victorious and would be the dominant political power until James McKenna created the Terran Hegemony in 2315. They were for all intents and purposes the planetary government for this time period, and a democratic one at that. Offices and positions of political power were filled anyone who could convince the majority of the people that they were competent..."

"I know what a democracy is," Quintus interrupted.

"Of course, sir. The point was that for a while, the Western Alliance made democracy work, at least for a couple centuries. Of course, the reason it worked was because it was confined to one world where today's communication lags and bottlenecks don't exist. And it worked for a world that was more populated than any world in the Inner Sphere is today.

"But in any case, the Western Alliance had emerged victorious and become the single most powerful government humanity had yet seen to date. And the next century was largely peaceful barring the need to incorporate the 'Third World' – essentially that era's version of the Periphery powers – and raise them to the Western Alliance's standard of living."

"And what were they like militarily?" Quintus asked thoughtfully.

"Militarily... it was just insane," Sorenson replied. "The nations of the time fielded huge armies for their given population sizes. Each of the major nations of the Cold War could each field armies to rival any of today's House armies. And this was during peacetime! The Russian Civil War alone saw internecine conflict between forces with millions of troops originally intended to be used against the Western Alliance," She shook her head. "And that was before the Western Alliance threw

in *their* millions of troops to restore order. At the end of it, the Western Alliance had an army that could have given Aleksandr Kerensky's Star League Army trouble."

"Surely you're exaggerating," Quintus said. "At the very least they had much more primitive equipment than Kerensky."

"I wish I were, sir," Sorenson said fervently. "Oh sure, their equipment was primitive by Star League or even today's standards, but they weren't all that far behind either. In their day, it wasn't the tank that was the King of the Battlefield, it was artillery. And what I've read is that their artillery was far more accurate than any artillery since then, and artillery weapons haven't changed all that much in the intervening centuries." She paused and looked thoughtful. "Of course, it helped that they were confined to one planet and didn't have to deal with things like variant surface gravity and planet rotational speed; the literature seems to indicate that you need to take those into account to get accurate artillery fire, and each artillery unit carried around a small library of books just to deal with all the variables."

"So let me present a hypothetical scenario," Quintus said. "Suppose through some magical or natural phenomenon, early Twenty-first Century Terra was displaced in time to the present day. How much force would be needed to take it?"

"Take it?" Sorenson said skeptically. "Sir, I don't think it's possible. The armies of the time were made up with citizen soldiers. The civilian populations were loyal to their governments and willing to fight to an unbelievable degree. Even assuming you could defeat the field armies – no guarantee there short of stripping the entire Inner Sphere of ALL its military forces and the Jumpships and Dropships to move them – you'd be presented with guerilla fighting on a planetary scale. I'm sorry, but it would be completely impractical to conquer any such world. You could try to destroy them with orbital bombardment, but we don't have anything that can do that short of breaking out the nuclear weapon stockpiles. And I wouldn't trust that would work either."

"Why not?"

"Because the Western Alliance would have nuclear weapons too... and a lot more of them," Sorenson answered. "At the Cold War's height, there were enough nuclear weapons on Earth – and the missiles to launch them – to render any *ten worlds* uninhabitable. And I wouldn't be surprised if my estimate is low. Luckily, they were never used, otherwise you and I wouldn't be here talking about it."

"Well, then, I'm glad that it's impossible for whole planets to time travel," Quintus said thoughtfully.

"Of course, sir," the young woman agreed with a laugh. "Still, it shows how far we've fallen when even a 'primitive' Terra can outgun a Successor State."

"Hmm, you do good work," Quintus told her. Now, if only the little fact finding mission he had sent out found nothing, he could relax and go back to living in a relatively sane universe that didn't have time traveling planets in them. "So, Miss Sorenson, how would you like an assignment on Antallos? This CSN have a mania for using obscure historical references and I'm sure the ambassadorial staff there could use an analyst of your caliber."

FSJS Leonardo Da Vinci
Interstellar Space
Just outside the Grantville Cluster

"This can't be possible!" Donna Madigan, navigator of the Jumpship *Da Vinci*, swore vehemently.

"What's the matter, Donna?" asked William Duvall, the Jumpship's captain.

"I'll tell you what's wrong, Skipper," Donna snarled. "The damn stars aren't where they're supposed to be!"

"Well, the old Star League survey charts that we're using are a few centuries old..." Duvall again.

"But not by this much!" Donna told him. "None of the stars in the

direction we want to go match up to the charts at all. Not their positions, nor their spectrographic signatures, nothing!"

"Maybe the Star League faked the original survey to hide something?" Duvall suggested, recalling his instructions for this mission, the very secret instructions that he couldn't even tell his crew about unless absolutely necessary. When the head of the MIIO gave you instructions personally, you followed them to the letter.

"I thought about that too," Donna told him in an 'I'm not an idiot' tone of voice. "But the actual stars I'm looking at look like the fakes, not the survey data."

"How so?"

"I'm getting a match for them all right, but they're a match for the stars around *Terra*," Donna told him. "But we didn't misjump into the center of the Inner Sphere because I can still see the star we're at is nowhere near there!"

"Huh," Duvall said, floored. When he had been briefed about this mission, neither he nor the man who briefed him had actually expected to find something like this. But his instructions did cover such a find and they had been very explicit. "Alright, Donna, start plotting more jumps, say three or four. I want to do a survey of the Cluster and see exactly how much of it matches the core of the Inner Sphere. Just one thing."

"Yes?"

"Avoid Terra – or this Cluster's version of it – and any other potentially inhabited systems," Duvall told her. Oh yes, his instructions had been VERY specific. It was after all hard to report what you found if you were captured or nuked by *any* paranoid locals. "Once that's done, we're going home."

Explorer Corps Regional Headquarters Baliggora, Outworlds Alliance

Precentor Margaret Grey cursed she read another negative report.

The First Circuit back on Terra had been slowly turning up the pressure on her to find this 'Motherload' or 'Third Earth' or whoever these new Periphery upstarts were. Unfortunately, she only had so many Jumpships that could only recharge their KF drives so fast, even using their fusion reactors fed by capacious fuel tanks. Grey had basically told the First Circuit as much. She had yet to hear back from them about it.

The current report on the screen in front of her was on the last former Outworlds Alliance planet on a certain checklist. The ravages of the Succession Wars had shrunk the Alliance, making them pull back from and abandon their outer Periphery holdings in order to stave off their neighbors. This particular planet was the last of those holdings to be surveyed and had turned out to be inhabited by people regressed to barely steam age levels of technology and almost certainly not 'Motherlode'. That meant that the theory that 'Motherlode' was an ex-Alliance world would have to be tossed into the trash.

It also meant that Grey needed to come up with a new search strategy.

"Precentor?" Grey's secretary called, interrupting her thoughts. "We've received a message from the other Regional Headquarters. They have orders to reassign several Jumpships to us. Currently, the *Far Horizon*, *Frontiersman*, and *Outbound Light* have been routed to us with more following when more Jumpships check in. They should begin arriving in eight months."

"Thank you, Adams," Grey acknowledged. "We're obviously going to have to expand our logistical base. Start putting a preliminary list of supplies we'll need for them."

"Yes, Precentor."

Let's see, Grey thought. Since the old Outworlds Alliance territories were checked off, it was time to start spreading out. There was the Moore Nebula nearby; it had plenty of hiding places. The Nantucket sector had little more than a cursory survey done on it. The Grantville Cluster...

No. The Grantville Cluster had been rather thoroughly surveyed by the Explorer Corps only sixty years before and found nothing. The head of station at the time had been convinced that there was a hidden Star League facility there but nothing had been found, certainly no habitable worlds; those were a bit difficult to hide. Better to look elsewhere.

HINODE Industrial Compact Test Facility
Hakone town, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan
21 January 2007/3022

Hakone was a town known mostly for its tourist spots (and being the setting of a certain controversial anime), a sleepy little place with a population of about fourteen thousand. Three months after the massed pirate attack against "Motherload", the national government in talks with the Heavy Industry conglomerates decided the place would be ideal for setting up their prototyping factories.

Two months later, the town's population had all but doubled. A pity that a few golf courses had to be sacrificed; but flat building sites were laid, airfields set up, and assembly plants were up and waiting for parts to arrive. Not unexpectedly, when truly motivated the Japanese Heavy Industry could put buildings up in a hurry. Almost as if Gojira was on the way and some conveniently explodable city was needed as a decoy.

It was not just for sake of irony that the of heavy industry companies chose to build their 'mech facility on the site of what could have been Tokyo-3.

There was, of course, no geofront underneath Hakone (to everyone's vast relief) but the mountains surrounding the area did provide seclusion and security. Gora and Old Hakone were in easy reach through the Hakone Highway, however, that said highway had only one easily-blocked route to the east, towards the city of Odawara. The highway joined with the old Kyu-Tokaido road directly south of Mount Hakone, where there was a historic checkpoint. Beyond that, the highway merged with the Hakone Skyline road to the west; and the way out to the larger town of Gotemba was either through the Nagao or Kojri Pass; each again easily monitored.

Hakone was also on the connecting road between Tokyo and Kyoto. More importantly, Gotemba City to the west housed military facilities and a large training area for the modern Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force while Mishima City to the south and Odawara City to

the northeast both had extensive sea and rail industrial and transport links.

Hakone was up on the mountains, but might as well have been an island. It was entirely self-contained, and supplies from the outside poured in a continuous stream. It was an information black hole, the pirates were kept in total isolation, and the Japanese public was not inclined to inquire too deeply into the secrecy. National pride was one thing, of course, but to build a BattleMech was also *business*. Only a dog barks before he is prepared to show his strength.

Kakeru Apartment JSDF Support Site, Hakone

Rick Cocker (or Riku Kakeru, as he'd come to like how the locals said it) suffered because of the delay. Everyone else had adapted to the unlimited wellspring of weirdness that was "Motherload". As leader of their little band, he kept himself wound up and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The apartments were pre-fab structures, but extremely well-furnished. It was close to a hot springs inn, where the crew of the Leopard-class DropShip Daedalus were expected to partake of unlimited access to good food, happy company, nice long soaks, and mind-easing relaxation.

A short distance away was Gora, with its shops, temples, and old-time charms. Spending money was in no short supply, either.

He stared out at the restful mountain view. In his right hand he held a can of Coke. His father and Roy's father started the Skull Squadron mercenary unit. They had started off with *four* LAMs, three ASFs, and four light and medium 'mechs in a Lance. They were a very flexible recon and raiding company operating off two dropships.

Slowly, bit by bit, the years ate away at the families. Roy's father died first in some skirmish with the Mariks, then Davion ASFs destroyed one of the dropships, removing half of their number in one swoop. The years afterward had not been kind, whittling their assets down to just five 'mechs, the heaviest being Roy's 45-ton Phoenix Hawk.

Now Roy Gunter was dead. Rick had never really wanted to become a leader. His wife, Lisa, or Claudia, Roy's girlfriend... they would be so much **better** at it, but they weren't MechWarriors. The Demi-Lance and the supporting crew were now his to command. He could lead them nowhere.

He had to continually remind himself that he was not being held by Kuritans, that these people all loathe ever being compared to the scions of the Draconis Combine, but it remained that he was chained to the ground by hostages. They took away Roy, he had a right to hate them, but they intentionally made it so difficult to hold a grudge.

What kept ringing warning bells was that he knew that they knew that he knew it but they refused to act upon it. They were too polite, too considerate, and slowly a debt of honor was building.

Buron Cavalry, for example, was called to assist in the strike on Antallos. It was a loss of face to both him and the Japanese government that they could not do more to help, but a Light Lance was totally redundant there.

He was redundant here. He sighed. The Nippons were far more interested in their 'Mechs than the mercenaries. The 'short-term' security contract was a joke; who maintained security over whom?

"I'm ready. Sorry to keep you waiting." The sliding screen door opened, and Rick turned to see his wife in a dazzlingly white uniform. 'RDF cut', his mind supplied, with the boldly-colored collar and all. Her long brown hair ended in curled bobs over her shoulder and under her neck.

Lisa Hales Cocker huffed. "I look ridiculous, don't I?"

"No, no, you look GOOD!" Rick quickly replied. She was seven years older than him and did not look it. Lisa had despaired of her serious, mature looks when younger, but as the years passed she changed very little. Just as beautiful as the day Rick realized he was in love.

"I know where this came from. I look like -her-." Meaning Misa Hayase, of course. Lisa adjusted her husband's collar and pushed a few curly tendrils of hair off his forehead. "Well, they got your messy hair right, at least. Our hosts are obsessed about turning dreams to reality... I'm still not sure if that's a good thing."

"Well, we now have Macross-style uniforms, Macross-style battlemechs, I'm pretty sure if they could actually build the SDF-1, they won't hesitate." That, he had to admit, would be awesome.

Lisa laughed lightly. "Quite."

Their people had adapted in different ways. The moment, the very exact INSTANT, that their technicians (and Ben) saw the SDF-1 undergo Modular Transformation in the Macross anime, they were **hooked**.

'Oh lordy, it is a crime that something this cool does not exist. How soon can you make something like that?! I want to help!'

They were like children. Max and Miriya were even worse. He had to worry about all of them.

There was a knocking at the door. Rick looked at his watch. "Okay, we still have about enough time to make it." The watch was one of those new devices with a touch calculator and mini-TV on its LCD screen. Rick was still getting used to the idea that he was wearing a goddamn **computer** on his wrist.

Lisa smiled again. She understood her husband's fears. "We may not be the stars of the show, but let's not disappoint our hosts too much, neh? Let's go."

Tokaido Road Hakone

They did not talk much while inside the car. Very early on, Rick and Lisa had come to the horrid realization of what these Earthers, these

Motherloaders, considered spying devices. Privacy was an illusion. Sure, they had given their word that no monitoring was going on, but it was not like Rick and the others could ever really know.

'It's what I would have done!' he thought, while watching the countryside go by. The passing of a year meant that the Nippons would have already squeezed out almost everything that they wanted to know. He had been extremely cooperative in their 'discussions' about light mech and infantry tactics, much like the rest of his overly grateful crew.

They had grown soft, used to luxury. None of them wanted it to stop.

Adapted? He almost snarled. Tamed, more like it. A large part of him was relieved, apart from a few incidents at least all their children were doing well. A life away from the battlefield... it was something he thought he would never be able to give them. It was almost worth his pride as a MechWarrior.

His gaze flicked to his wife. She understood that faintly panicked expression. *'Think they'll ever let us fight again?'* he wanted to ask. A cook cooks, a painter paints, and a MechWarrior... without his skills, the opportunity to use them, Rick felt as if he did not really exist.

'Today, we will know.' Lisa tried to convey with a nod. She was getting annoyed at having the Daedalus used as nothing more than a lift service for satellites and equipment.

It was deeper than just feeling useless, she saw. The line between a mercenary and a pirate was a thin one, and even thinner still between a renegade, out-of-luck unit and someone who had no choice but to hit someone just to survive. Vorax's call for merc units was windfall for mercs reduced to just a single lance. The disaster that was 'Motherload' put even that to shame. They did not have to worry about anything, about starvation, about selling 'mechs and turning into a dedicated support outfit.

They were a *family*, a collection from all over the Inner Sphere bound not by ideology or greed but loyalty to each other. Nevertheless, a lot of their crew former Kuritans. It was just too easy to slip into

conditioned obedience. Nippon was *paradise* to them. It was everything the Draconis Combine *should be* to its citizens. What Rick feared was being absorbed. Cultural poisoning. His family would lose itself amidst a society that did not really care about each of them.

They would forever be *gaijin*, foreigners, barbarians from beyond the stars. The children had some early trouble with that, and Rick remembered her daughter coming home crying and spitting about how the other kids were so stupid, so -weak-, 'they don't know anything but they get everything'.

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He remembered the strange meeting with the elementary school principal.

Rick came from the Combine border. Lisa was from the Davion world of Lyceum. He offered his apologies and tuned out the conversation after that.

"The reed bends in the wind, and thus does not break."

"And it is men who build homes out of stone, against which the wind itself smashes itself in futility. She is the daughter of a MechWarrior, and too many of her family had already died to protect her birthright."

"This is no longer the Inner Sphere, Kakeru-san." the old man's voice held a warning note.

"Yes, it IS. Your people are one planet among thousands. My daughter will not grow up to be some pampered house -toy-. A part of her is -samurai-, and if those useless little girls can't deal with one of them having the skills to fight for her life, then they shouldn't have been stupid enough to think they could get away with it."

"Do not forget that your people invaded our world. You are here under our good graces. It would be most... unwise... to disturb the harmony of our school."

"Do not forget, sir, that you cannot ignore the rest of humanity out there. Your school may be safe and warm, but out there... is injustice, and hatred, and murder. Just as my daughter needs to learn to live a life of peace, so must your children realize that she will someday go back into that, to try to find some way of making it better.

Your GDI cannot solve everything by itself... for one thing, unless you mobilize most of this world's population, you would lack manpower. We... Spheroids... would have to fight for our own future. That is our right.

Forcing us to obey without explanation, refusing to accept the validity of our culture, or preventing us from defending ourselves; is the lack of honor we expect from any Successor Lord." Her smile widened. "The distance between you and the Kurita... would you care to demonstrate it some more?"

The principal adjusted his glasses. "You must understand that this cannot go unpunished."

"Oh, of course. Punish her. She will not complain. My daughter is - not weak-." She felt her husband's hand on her shoulder. She did not know just where to direct her own anger and frustration. "... do please warn the other children become more prudent. It is... ill-fitting, for a society supposedly so free, to be so... intolerant."

Strangely enough, Max and Miriya's twins, Dana and Flaro, had even less problems fitting in despite looking so obviously different. Like their parents, they had dyed their hair. Dana's temper was worthy of a Meltrandi, but her brother's thoughtful reticence brought admiring looks from the girls.

Puzzled, he later asked "I keep -ignoring- them! Why would they even like me? Look. GO AWAY YOU VAPID LITTLE DRONES!" (squeals of glee) "See? It doesn't make sense! Nothing on this deranged planet makes any sense!"

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"The nail that stands up gets hammered down." Lisa said later to

everyone in the crew. "It's fine to be cooperative, but don't fall into the trap of trying too hard for rewards and approval. It's good, isn't it? This is a nice place to live in, it wouldn't be too bad if we never ever left, right? But we will always be *gaijin*. The more you try to become like them, the more they will reject you. The more you try to become part of their unique social order, the more they close up and shut you out.

But... as we learned from Miriya... they would tolerate being open and loud. Or just plain weird, like Max."

"Hey."

"But that's why I married him." Miriya cooed.

"Embrace that which makes you different, and the more they'll try to accept you. It makes them -prove- that they're a tolerant people, that have learned from the mistakes of their war-mongering ancestors. Let them prove that they changed... and let's all pretend, them and us, that the roots of the Draconis Combine aren't too close to the surface."

'And that's why I married her.' Rick had mused at the time, grinning proudly.

Second Floor Lounge HINODE Research Center

Hakone was actually composed of several small towns, complementing each other as a greater tourist/spa region. The HINODE Industrial Compact had its main office in Motokone, south of Mount Hakone and around the southwest tip of Lake Ashino. It was a squat, chromed building that made jarring contrast against the artfully-arranged wooden buildings just a few blocks down. For some strange reason, the juxtaposition between old and new also appealed to the Japanese mind, so the local home-owners did not protest too much.

Or more likely, the increased tourism money the facility would provide when the security lifted.

Rick and Lisa were met by armed guards, who saluted first before escorting them in. Once inside though, the pair were left on their own.

The first floor held offices of mundane utility, mostly public relations and meeting rooms. The second floor was all for show. It was mostly empty space, and the walls had either large windows or LCD wall-filling screens. Faint J-pop was in the air.

The people clustered into cliques; military folk discussing the potential uses of the technology, news from Antallos, and so on. The scientists and engineers looked nervous, unwilling to voice any details about their designs. Businessmen talked in hushed tones about their deals. The dignitaries and newsmen tried to mingle, but they did not have much information of their own to offer.

"Captain!" A tall man with exceptionally thick eyebrows and eyelashes raised his hand and approached. He wore a buttoned-up lab coat, with the nametag LANG. "And... Captain." He added with a grin towards Lisa.

"Emil, hello." Rick answered back, after an enthusiastic round of shaking hands. "It's been almost a month since we last saw you. Having fun?"

"Fun?! Hah! Do you have any idea how many nights of sleep we gave up just to get things -less likely- to fall apart, not to mention function, for the deadline? But it was fun, yes."

Lisa carefully looked around. "Would you care to show us around, Emil? Pretend that we haven't see any of this before?"

"Why, certainly, cap'n!"

Emil was thirty-seven years old, and had maintained their 'mechs just as his father had for Rick's father. Among the crew of the DropShip Daedalus, he had the easiest time adapting. The Nippons had no

choice but to include the man who actually knew how to repair the LAM.

Disdain, being treated like some ignorant savage able only to parrot information; he could deal with that. He could deal with Kuritans. Very soon HINODE's engineers realized that for all their advantages in the scientific background, they still lacked even the most basic idea of how to put together a mech that KILLS. Quickly, efficiently. They thought of the battlemechs like a **toy**, a MECHA, completely missing the BATTLE part of BattleMech.

"It took them many, many tests with the PPC we stripped from the Daedalus to accept that maybe making something smaller and lighter isn't as important as being able to take a hit and keep on ticking."

"The balance between cost and performance." said Lisa.

"Exactly. It's sort of pointless if they're building BattleMechs for sale to the Inner Sphere."

"Still, wouldn't it be worth it simply to NOT get damaged as easily? I know the Nippons already altered our battlemechs with their scary-good sensors." Rick looked doubtful.

A mech all filled up with 'lostech' would ironically be too good to risk being lost in battle. Another thing that might mean they would never be allowed off the planet.

"Actually, since most of our 'mechs cost between two to three million C-bills... I'm not sure how they keep arriving at the exact number without a running inventory... it doesn't really add much to the cost. Except that because the things are meant to be replaceable, the parts alone would be damn near worth a whole new mech by itself."

Stands, signs and booths showed the history and elements of battlemech technology. Rick's attention lingered on the old Mackie.

"What? But they can stamp out hundreds of these things." He had grown to deal with that the 'lostech' around him wasn't exactly lost, but it was boggling how so cheaply they could distribute the things.

"You could pick up buckets of them."

Lisa nodded. "They're cheap and easy to obtain, here. But one world among thousands, remember?"

"Yep. Which would be easier to steal, a whole 'mech or a box of their tiny, tiny, targeting computers?" Emil shrugged. "Besides, it's not just LAMs they're desperately want to build. They can be elegant a bit when it comes to the LAMs, since they know whoever wants it can afford the extras, but it's not going to make them any real money."

Lisa looked at the clusters of black-suited businessmen. Their faces were somber. The whole enterprise left many companies operating at a loss.

They walked around, discussing things only useful to those planning to run a merc unit unsupported for long stretches. They were mostly ignored, no longer 'news'. Emil brought the two to a row of pods on raised frames. The pods jerked left and right, up and down, and made loud sounds.

"Mech simulator pods?" Lisa's voice held approval.

Emil shook his head and gestured over to another display stand, containing a partially-disassembled MechWarrior escape pod. "No, actual cockpits. They insisted to GDI that every cockpit delivered can act as its own simulator. It won't have the 'rumbling' effect like those trainers, but under each chair is supposedly enough storage capacity to choke an HPG station."

"Why?"

Emil shrugged. "Something about a 'learning computer'. They don't really understand how the neurohelmet works, and what they can't understand... they don't trust. You've seen how these people try to figure out everything, right?"

Both nodded. "So... this is the cockpit we're going to use from now on?" It didn't look too different from the old version. The main screens had been replaced by larger LCDs, the canopy had nearly

double the thickness of the odd 'transparent-but-still-almost-as-good-as-regular-armor' material. "What's with the armature?"

"Their targeting computers are different than ours. Theirs do all the aiming on their own, even when to pull the trigger, sounds kind of lazy, doesn't it? The neurohelmet blocks that when it comes to weapons in the arms. The Mechwarrior has to make a conscious decision to move the arms, and that means first he has to see the enemy before he can react. There's always going to be a delay."

"From how fast people can react and for the servos in the arms to move, right?" Lisa noted. The Nippons could mess with the computers all they liked, but there was always the physical advantage of skill. MechWarriors were each different, and a fraction of second was worth the difference between being respected or Dispossessed.

"Their computers -are- faster. Much faster. Somehow." Rick grumbled.

"You know about force feedback, right, Captain? What this does is subtly nudge in advance the pilot to where he should point his arms. It works better with the 'plugsuit', since that would also warn about hits."

Lisa leaned closer to the display. "Interesting. Can the Inner Sphere copy this?"

"Well, they could, but they would need a Targeting Computer first. Those things are heavy AND expensive." Emil grinned. "But, as you can see, every cockpit we make will come with its own Targeting Computer. This is the GDI 'Small Cockpit', half the size and weight of any other in the Inner Sphere but with all the C3 capabilities of things three times heavier."

"I thought GDI was pushing for the 'double-seat cockpit'."

Emil let the moment hang a bit. He knew real reason. "Ah, yes... for 'situational awareness', they say. LAMs have to worry more about weight and should be mobile enough to gather their own recon. Mostly, being smaller also means it's easier to eject the pod as a whole."

"What about the things you're building that are -not- LAMs?"

"The Guardian Mobile BattleMechs? They can have either double or single-seat cockpits depending on their roles. We'll probably end up using the single-seat Small Cockpit for export versions, since the feedback system is something that MechWarriors can use. "

"Why pay for two pilots when you only need one?" Lisa answered. "The double-seater would most likely be used just as training machines."

"Right, captain."

Rick remained silent, lost in thought. When he spoke again, his tone was faintly accusing. "Emil, the Nippons have been pressuring me to outright SELL my father's mech to them. Even Roy's *Phoenix Hawk*."

"I... sorry, captain. If you ask me, it sounds like a good idea."

"And they did ask you first, didn't they? Why don't you tell me why being Dispossessed would be a good thing?!"

"You wouldn't be Dispossessed, exactly. Now that the Nippons have finished working out their *RX-GNDM* and *RM-GM* designs, they're ready to produce a better LAM based on the *Phoenix Hawk*."

"I will not give up my father's 'mech just for some shiny new Earther toy!"

"With all due respect, sir, she's an antique! She barely belongs on the battlefield, where almost everything else is a threat. If we're going to be working for the Nippons, or anyone else, we're going to need bigger, more powerful mechs just to survive."

"That doesn't mean it's any better to just have her cut up and used as spare parts. An honorable end in battle..."

"Would kill you, sir." Emil sighed. "*Stingers* -are- flimsy."

"Well, maybe there is some other way of getting reinforced without having to give up our 'mechs..." said Lisa, trying to calm everyone. "Maybe a lease, or something like that." In a whisper she added "Rick, new 'Mechs might mean they need us to do something that requires a stronger lance."

Louder now "Emil, can you tell us anything about what they want us to use?"

"Hmm... I can't really say, since there's still a lot to smooth out, but... you know they've been trying to duplicate conversion mechanisms to turn the other BattleMechs into Land-Air Mechs? Watch the demonstration later. It's going to be like that, only... better?" Emil's smile was weak and apologetic.

Rick still looked sour.

HINODE Demonstration Site South of Lake Ashino

Hakone could not support proper Proving Grounds, it lacked enough flatland. Proper testing would have to be done elsewhere, maybe near Okinawa. There was a gantry for the DropShip *Daedalus*, so there would be no problem moving mechs around the country. However, for a little 'dog-and-pony' show it was sufficient.

The delegation had gathered in a small refreshments hut in what used to be the Hakone Kurakake Golf Course, directly south of Lake Ashino.

It was chosen because of its remoteness. Wild shots would have to cross the lake first before hitting anything valuable, or smack into the mountain range physically separating Shizuoka and Kanagawa Prefectures. The breeze off the lake kept things cool, despite that it was almost noon.

"Why is Shigeru Miyamoto here?" asked GDI representative Colonel Ronald Gallagher, discreetly gesturing with a cocktail glass.

"Because the best control system is one that doesn't constantly remind the pilot he is inside it." answered Dr. Nanbara. Nintendo was more than just a games company, it also dealt with hardware and artificial intelligence; incredibly, Wii architecture proved useful in providing a 'buttons-free' interface for the mecha.

It was another major doctrinal stumbling block for the designers, that the neurohelmet interface was barely-understood technology, therefore Earth's equipment should not *rely on it* so much.

"Oh, Doctor Nanbara...!" a jovial rotund man approached and made a pitiful attempt of trying to bend on his stomach. Dr. Nanbara just extended her hand for a western greeting.

"No, no, no... you waste your words here, Gottleybu-sensei. What for, in finally carrying our share of the load? One does not congratulate the runner who lags behind, who edges back into the line."

"You do yourself, and your people an injustice, Doctor Nanbara. No matter how one looks at it, a whole new battlemech in under a year is a miracle."

"No, we cheated. The mecha you will find here, hah! They dare call it Earth's first home-built battlemechs? Without the... resources scavenged from Antallos, the production roadblock would never have been overcome." Dr. Ikumi Nanbara dismissively waved. "I would never admit to calling these monstrosities 'new' designs. This is all smoke and mirrors, trying to make people see things that we don't actually have."

"Protaganda, Doctor Nanbara? That is just business as usual."

The tiny scientist sighed.

She looked positively tiny next to Dr. Hendrik Gottleib, who seemed more of an amorphous blob out of an impressionist's easel than a metallurgist, and Colonel Gallagher, seemingly a solid slab of dark muscle. In contrast her features were icy-sharp, eyes wide behind large round glasses, and much as her behaviour made her unpopular with her colleagues so did foreigners flock to her refreshing, if

occasionally abusive, frankness.

She turned aside. "Have you met Colonel Gallagher, Gottlieb-sensei?"

"Oh, ja, yes. I believe we have met before. Hmm, how are those mech-scaled vibroblades doing for you?"

"They're... quite useful, Doctor. Thank you." Personally, he thought the two tons for the devices were wasted, as GDI sought to destroy the enemy well before they enter close range. "The new BattleMechs may have more use for them, though. The ones we use don't exactly have useful arms." He turned to Dr. Nanbara. "If you're a cheater, doctor, then we're swindlers. We started out with many 'mechs to fiddle with, while you had to figure out how to build one from scratch."

"The reputation of the... may I say, Nipponese? as wizards of reverse-engineering and miniaturization is well-deserved." The round man's laugh was loud, and seemed forced.

Dr. Nanbara hid her mouth. "You are too used to thinking of us, and by the way it is perfectly fine to say 'Japanese', as business competitors. Remember that as it -is- business, we must also compete against each other inside the system."

The Japanese were far more likely to develop and patent the *process* rather than the product, for dominance of a superior model would only last so long until competitors could duplicate and improve upon the model.

Dr. Nanbara worked for Toshiba, world's largest producer of semiconductors, which a home field advantage by being able to draw a lot of man-and-brain-power from Mishima and Odawara. However (likely in part of her personality) she could never have participated in the V project, were it not for Professor Rei of Waseda University's personal request for his crisis team. Waseda University had as its alumni the CEOs of Toshiba, Honda, Mitsubishi and the co-founder of Sony.

The market crash of the nineties rubbed the seemingly invincible veneer off the *keiretsu* (otherwise known as crony capitalism), but company loyalty was still the defining virtue. Dr. Nanbara found it tragicomic.

Professor Rei and his team ran roughshod over company scientists and engineers (backed by the support of big industry's top leaders) into ever simpler, easily reproduceable systems. Ironically, it the 'motherload' of surplus equipment from Port Krin (GDI was extremely careful not to refer to it as 'loot') that could finally get things going simply by leapfrogging many 'elegant' but impractical solutions. That Rei-sensei had deliberately stalled research on some projects to focus on others, had earlier brought frustration and criticism. It turned out that he had saved them a lot of unnecessary effort.

Dr. Nanbara flicked a look at Prof. Rei, who like her was a child of 'mixed blood'. A Nobel Prize winner, much as he brought a 'common-sense' approach to the utterly fresh field of true mecha engineering, he had very little sense when it came to his own life and relating to other people. His students often had to protect him from, well, himself. Distractedly he followed an officious-looking middle-aged man in a trim black suit. HINODE Vice-president Akametsu approached and greeted the Colonel.

"Colonel Ga-lagu-heru... it is an honor to speak with you again." The reedy man bowed. "May I introduce Aru-tur-o Morino Rei-sensei, our Project Chief?"

The soldier bowed. "Pleased to meet you, professor. And might I say...?" He blinked. "That is a truly -righteous- 'fro you have."

Prof. Rei bowed perfunctorily, and resumed staring off into the distance. "Hm? Yes. Nabeshin managed to infiltrate the last Inter-Departmental Poker Tournament and I lost a bet."

"This is supposed to be the second-most secure place in Japan. How can anyone just infiltrate it while dressed like Lupin the Third?!" Dr. Nanbara muttered under her breath.

A small stage held a panel of important observers and commentators. Rick was there, his white uniform and Prof. Rei's lab coat the only things brightening up the row of black suits. A man holding a microphone, some senior management official from a company, bid rote thanks and greetings to the assembly. "We are ready to begin. Gentlemen and ladies, please direct your attention north."

Two shapes skimmed the surface of the lake, v-lines intersecting. They approached quickly, veered off just before reaching the shore, letting those watching behold the distinctive silhouettes of the variable-geometry fighter planes. Valkyrie VF-1s, both painted flat white, with a black skull mark at the nose cone.

Gazes briefly flicked to Rick Cocker, now commander of the pirate group that attacked Japan. Their Lance only possessed one transforming Stinger LAM. The other, therefore, was a conversion.

The planes looped around and came to land. Thruster pods bent down out, becoming like the back-bent legs of a chicken, powerful jets still burning off the end of vectoring nozzles. Those thickened nozzles served like toes, as the the planes touched down.

There were grinding noises and metallic clanking as the planes bent into themselves. Wings folded back, the nose-cone bent down, the center frames split in halves, and cyclopean heads emerged. A blue stripe ran down one of the LAM's chest. That meant Max was its pilot, the other one with the red stripe was Miriya's mech; the Wasp.

Applause greeted the successful ASF to BattleMech conversion.

"We now know how to successfully convert existing Stingers, Wasps, Phoenix Hawks, and other battlemechs based on the VF-1 into LAMs. We may now attempt to create new LAM chassis suitable for rapid response."

'Attempt' being the operative word. The VF project was stuck with a piece-by-piece copy of a Stinger LAM. Making one stable at fifteen tons heavier modeled after the Phoenix Hawk was proving near insurmountable, even at just the simulation level.

"Is there any point to having transformable mecha?" one of the reporters asked. "Wouldn't the conversion equipment mean that they would never be as tough as ground mecha or as fast as fighters?"

Rick answered that. "They're usually used as scouts, since they're faster in the air than any other light mech can hope to run, while still being able to land and inspect more carefully. Of course, since all LAMs are VSTOL, we're also able to guard or observe places normally unreachable by other BattleMechs."

"By using a EndoSteel frame and the lighter Small Cockpit, there is no weight penalty for the conversion equipment." Prof. Rei added, yawning.

"Well, not for the *Wasp*, at least. We waste half a ton with the *Stinger*, and one ton up to the *Phoenix Hawk*."

"LAMs, unlike conventional forces or battlemechs, can enter from orbit on their own. Drop pods, at least from what we know of what the Inner Sphere uses, make for slow and vulnerable targets, while DropShips are... unsubtle. This makes LAMs useful in surgical strikes against defenses or raiding behind enemy lines, and adding our stealth technology will only add to that." JSDF representative Shino Matsunaga finished up.

More questions erupted. "Please, please...." the announcer sought to regain control. "the demonstrations are not yet over."

"You are cleared for phase two." said Control from a nearby bivouac.

"Are you ready, dear wife?"

"Hah, just try to keep up, dear husband." Miriya replied, grinning fiercely.

Max and Miriya had an interesting relationship, as much rival as lovers. The two LAMs switched back to AirMech GERWALK mode and moved down the short airstrip. Once they had enough speed, they switched back to Fighter mode and burst up into the air.

A warning wail filled the area. "This is a live-fire test." came over the speakers. "Please remain in your assigned areas. Repeat, this is a live-fire test. To avoid accidents, please remain in your assigned areas."

The two LAMs burned to get as high as they could, kilometers up into the air. The Wasp was chosen for conversion because the HINODE designers were still unsure of having something that can break into orbit on its own. The engines fitted to the Wasp was not taken off a captured ASF, this one outright -bought- brand new from the ASF-reliant Outworlds Alliance. Neither 'mech was equipped for the heat of re-entry, that was another test for another day.

Instead, at a satisfactory height, the two LAMs switched back to Mech configuration, their leg jets pulsing. The two LAMS swooped and bobbed and made acrobatics in the sky, releasing colored flares for effect. Soon enough however, it was time to go to work. They switched back to AirMech/GERWALK and waited, circling at just above stall speed. Targets popped out from the lake and from the nearby hills.

"The *Stinger* and the *Wasp* are thirty and twenty-ton mecha, the lightest in use. This often means that they have much less firepower and more fragile than any other BattleMech that they encounter. Even medium vehicles are a threat." the announcer added to the action.

Miriya transformed her Wasp into Mech/Battloid form and dropped in free-fall. She whooped excitedly, before firing her foot jets to try and slow down the descent. The targets had darkened the air around her with clouds of simulated flak.

"Speed and long-range attacks seem the best method of minimizing its vulnerabilities, but the standard loadouts of both Scout 'Mechs were Medium lasers, Machine Guns and Short-Range Missiles, forcing rare and valuable machines to close in to fight where they might more easily be destroyed."

Miriya snapped out three Medium Laser shots in the space of two seconds, coring three targets. Their guns fell silent. She landed upon one of the pontoons, the platforms easily supporting twenty tons of

weight. Tracer rounds burst her way, and she took cover behind the frame of the destroyed bullseye.

Miriya looked at her rear camera and fired at the nearest target with the rear-facing Small Laser mounted on the back of her Wasp's head. It took three hits before it was destroyed.

Her computer began registering hits from the hills. From on high, twin white streaks emerged from wing pods of Max's Stinger, still in Fighter mode. The missiles exploded at targets two kilometers away, and leaving her free to act.

"The easiest solution was to replace their dumb-fire Short-Range Missiles with our own self-guiding Long-Range Missiles."

Miriya began jumping from pontoon to pontoon, destroying targets on the way. Her computer marked her armor being chewed up by simulated AC/2 fire. Unlike Max, all she had were directed-energy weapons useful only up to medium range.

They even had to switch to a smaller, less-powerful 110 Fusion Engine brought from Antallos. She grinned again. But so what? Her *Wasp* used to have two tons of armor, a single Medium Laser and an SRM2. Now she had four tons of armor, THREE Medium Lasers, and a head-turret Small Laser. She transformed back to Gerwalk mode and started to glide-strafe at the last remaining row of targets.

"Hah, I dare anyone think my *Wasp's* easy prey now." She had the firepower to take on 'mechs ten, even fifteen tons over her weight. For a twenty-ton 'mech, the lightest in use, that was almost insane. The fragility of the mech she inherited meant never before could she really fight as she wanted.

Unfortunately she knew that HINODE turned her Scout 'Mech into a combat-capable version just to prove that they could. No matter. She could deal, as long as they gave her one of those new LAMs based on the *Phoenix Hawk*. Miriya licked her lips. Now what could they do with forty to forty-five tons instead of twenty?

"Energy weapons do have the advantage of never running out of

ammo and cause good damage for their weight." the announcer as saying. "However, we still do not have many Lasers or PPCs, and there is a critical shortage of the smaller Fusion Engines required. This is why we are moving to a heavier chassis for the standard LAM, as there are more viable components for Medium mechs."

It as Max's turn to shine. He had an easier time of it, being that the Stinger had ten more tons to devote to weapons or armor. However, he remained in Gerwalk mode and by small jinks right and left somehow managed to avoid steams of computer-guided fire.

He launched two more missiles, then inexplicably zoomed forward, switching back to Fighter mode and racing his own missiles. The missiles won, of course, exploding targets on either side as Max suddenly switched modes and landed feet-first onto the hillside.

There were several large bright-LED screens that allowed visitors to follow the action. Gun-cameras from the targets showed only a brief flicker of white before being taken out.

Two Medium Lasers served well enough, and the Stinger ran cooler than the Wasp. Max demonstrated how to fight on steep slopes, using trees for cover, where no tank could really reach.

"Show off." Miriya huffed.

Soon enough, he too was done.

"Please prepare for phase three of the demonstration."

The two LAMs moved to near the shoreline. The second phase was easy, the targets were motionless after all. So the third phase should be against moving targets. Max and Miriya increased power to their sensors.

"Mech power-up detected." their computers warned.

Max barely had the time to notice the blip before there was the distinctive shriek of a PPC bolt cutting through the air. His displays fizzled out, and his mech in Gerwalk form crashed into the ground.

"Oh." he said woozily. "A hit."

"Max!"

"Don't worry dear, this may be a live-fire exercise, but that was still a powered-down shot. The computer says I 'lost' most of my armor and one of my Medium Lasers."

"You will be avenged, husband. I will make sure the children will cherish and honor your memory." Miriya switched to fighter mode, zooming close to the ground and following the shoreline.

"Uh, dear? I'm not dead."

In Fighter mode, the *Wasp LAM* could only bring to bear one Medium Laser and one Small Laser. In Gerwalk, it could fire one Medium Laser and One Small Laser forward while another Medium Laser faced to the rear.

There was the shriek again, and a blue streak of energy passed uncomfortably close. It would have hit, if Miriya wasn't in the middle of a frantic fighter-to-battloid transformation in mid-air. She rolled and hit the ground hard.

PPCs had power, but also lengthy refire rates. Miriya looked up to see the enemy emerge from cover. It was painted mostly white, with its upper torso blue, and carrying a shield that was eye-catchingly red.

"So this is the Gundam they're so secretive and so excited about..." Miriya whispered. Her computer noted it probably weighed fifty-five tons. "Oh, if only my husband was around. It looks like it has no long-range weapons other than the PPC."

Missiles streaked towards the Gundam. It hunkered down behind its shield, while Miriya took the chance to rush it.

On a private channel, Max said almost poutingly "Dear, you suck."

"Mmm."

Max now chuckled. "Have I told you 'I love you' lately?"

For the purposes of the exercise, Max's *Wasp*'s missiles were repurposed LRM-5s, turned into LRM-2s. A ton of LRM-5 ammo usually had 24 missiles, HINODE split that into two hardpoints on either wing. He had the choice of either shooting off pairs of missiles to conserve ammo (like an LRM 2), or in pairs of three (like an LRM6). No one could really explain why is it that LRM launchers were in multiples of five but their ammo came in multiples of two.

He launched six missiles, and a few seconds later six again. A stream of tracers shot out from one of the holes in RX-GNDM head, left of the V-fin on its forehead. Eight out of twelve missiles were taken down by its head-cannon AMS, while the rest slammed into its shield.

Miriya's three Medium Lasers ate away at its shoulder and arm armor. Then, to her horror, she found at that the GNDM's right arm, holding the PPC, rested over the left arm holding the shield. It was pointed her way right from the start, when she thought that rushing from the left meant it would have to make an obvious move to bring its weapon to bear.

There was a flash, and a simulated kill. Miriya's *Wasp* powered down.

"MiriYaaa.... ahem. No, wait. MiriYAAAAA."

"Oh just shut up and kill this thing."

More difficult than it looked, for Max only had a single salvo left. He swooped down, in close range the AMS wouldn't have time to calculate and react, and his single Medium Laser might just score a lucky hit. The precious seconds while the PPC cooled down was his only chance.

The GNDM stood up and nailed his LAM right on the nose with three Medium Lasers. Then, as if to add insult to injury, the PPC again much sooner than he had anticipated.

"The shield contains additional heatsinks." Max noted as his mech crashed and powered down. "I guess there is a point in fighting

defensively, right, dear?"

"Humf." Miriya crossed her arms over her bountiful chest. "I don't see no dead people."

"Aww..."

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"Please be reminded that the performance of the LAMs in the demonstration is not indicative of the LAMs to be produced. As much as the VF series is intended for fast reaction strikes, the RX series are intended for the defensive. The *Stinger* and the *Wasp* are simply too light to compete as Scout Mecha, this is part of the reason why we are urging for a larger standard chassis for the Variable Fighter."

Rick wasn't sure of what to feel. Max and Miriya had been humiliated out there, they were sent out to be knocked down. The pair didn't seem to mind, however. Even combined, their 'mechs weighed five tons less than the *GNDM*, the '*Gundam*', a high-performance machine that would likely never see production.

It was the *GM* that mattered, a cheaper, scaled-down version for export.

The *GM* itself showed up at last, ten tons lighter than the prototyping *GNDM*. The battlemech was painted an eye-searing orange. Like the *GNDM*, it had hid, powered-down, under camo netting nearby.

"Ben, what the hell?"

The orange *GM* waved at the crowd. "Hi, boss!"

The reporters were throwing questions around, and the panel was hard-pressed to answer them.

"How is the *GM* armed?"

"We don't have yet what they call omni technology, but the *GM* is capable of handling almost any ballistic weapon in its arm mounts

and any energy weapon in its torso mounts. For now are giving it a 'Improved Rifle' or the 'Variable Autocannon/5' on its right, three Medium Lasers, and a 20mm Vulcan Cannon that can double as an AMS in the head. It should be enough for most things around its weight class. Customers who want better firepower or ammo independence will have to wait until we have more energy weapons. The GM Medium Shield adds two tons of optional armor protection."

"Can we mass-produce the *VF* or the *GM*? What is the most important factor limiting their production?"

"The lack of buyers is the obvious limit. From a more practical point of view, we cannot build any more mecha until we have more Fusion Engines and Reactors. The *VF* series are reserved for GDI's Marines and specialist units, and will likely never need to be 'mass-produced' in quantities that will impact other combat vehicles. GDI has already reserved the first twenty-four mechs, four lances of *GM-Is* and two squadrons of *VF-1s*, from the initial production run. Of course, this relies upon us first getting twenty-four new Fusion reactors."

"What can you say about the rumor that BattleMech manufacturing will soon be moved away from Earth?"

"There are practical reasons for that. BT materials tend to be tougher and cheaper, and relocating production to somewhere they are more readily available, like Antallos, would also speed up production by assuring steady supply. Manufacturing battlomechs on Earth would mean shipping components from Antallos, then a completed 'Mech back to Antallos, all before anyone can buy them. This would save time and costs."

"Isn't that a risk? Antallos is an obvious target."

"We are only relocating manufacturing, not the research facilities. There will of course be some scientific initiatives there, but not to the extent that it would threaten Earth if they are stolen, sabotaged, or destroyed. Profit, for 'Mech manufacturers, is not going to be affected by distance from corporate headquarters."

"What about the BattleMechs themselves? Won't giving the Inner

Sphere better BattleMechs make them more of a threat? Isn't it giving up our own advantage?"

"That is Comstar's thinking. Earth has nothing to fear from BattleMechs. Earth has no real need of BattleMechs. It is why we are focusing on space defenses and construction. Selling BattleMechs would bring in currency while allowing our allies better means to defend themselves from predation."

On and on and on. Rick felt sick. He had managed to ignore it, to disbelieve it, but he could deny it no longer. These people, this planet, had all but declared war (even if cultural) over the entire Inner Sphere.

His family were under the care of madmen. A different sort of madness from the House Lords, of course, but still he felt things spiraling out of control. Others who had nothing but wealth, revenge or glory might accept this, but he simply could not trust his family to this great sweep of idealism.

The arrogance of it! A thousand years and hundreds of regiments could not change the Inner Sphere, how could a single world hope to affect thousands? How?! Even if the land beneath his feet was Earth, undeniable cradle of humanity, even Terra had grown insignificant in the passing of time. He looked at his hands. They were shaking. He did not understand. Nonetheless, he wanted to fight. He was a MechWarrior.

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Township of Al'Isard
New Dallas
Former Terran Hegemony
October 2006/3021

For all its Texan cultural trappings, Colonel Wayne mused as he sat across the table from the local leaders, the planet of New Dallas had some decidedly non-Texan cultural artifacts. The town's name for example suggested Arabic origins except that 'Isard' certainly wasn't Arabic; Wayne actually wasn't certain where the name originated from. Even individual names of the people he had been introduced to tended to run the gamut of different cultures on Earth.

Wayne put it down to the cultural mixing in the intervening centuries that he had heard about. God knew, his own version of the United States was getting pretty mixed even before the *Drakon* had first dropped into New Zealand.

"I must say, Colonel, the news you have for us is a might disappointing," Boss Tycho Jefferson was saying. 'Boss' seemed to be an official title, somewhere between 'Mayor' and 'Landlord'. If it was an inheritable title like so many in the Inner Sphere, the lack of deference shown by the other locals seemed to indicate that he wasn't abusive of his power... or that his power was more circumscribed than elsewhere. "On the other hand, we been left alone since the Rain o' Fire which from the sounds of it, was quite a blessing in disguise."

"I imagine so. Mister Jefferson," Wayne told him. "As near as we can tell, everyone else in the Inner Sphere has basically forgotten you exist, and the few that do remember think your world has been rendered uninhabitable."

"Yeah, about that," Sheriff Colton spoke up. "It's my job to enforce the law around these parts and you people are breaking it by sitting in the Old Capital City. For your own health, I gotta ask you to move out of there."

"If you're talking about radiation poisoning, Sheriff, I assure you that we're taking every precaution possible," Wayne assured him.

"Precautions?" Jefferson asked, intrigued.

"Yes. When we decided to set up base here, we did it specifically because we heard that no one would be living here," Wayne told them. "We also heard *why*, so we came equipped with every radiation detection and protective gear we could pack into the Dropships."

"Really?" Jefferson mused. "Could we perhaps... I dunno... *borrow* some of this gear? Despite the injunction against going into the Old Capitol City, some people still do anyway, risking their life and the lives of any little ones they might yet have." Wayne noted that he was careful not to mention the two such individuals that had made first contact with the GDI party. "Course, we have to punish them, but that's always just a slap on the wrist, especially if they bring back something useful."

"Boss!" Colton objected.

"Now, now, Bubba, you know it's true," Jefferson chided him. He turned back to Wayne. "Truth is Colonel, there's stuff we need in the ruins of the old cities, things we can't make anymore but which make life so much easier. You understand?"

"The Inner Sphere calls it *lostech*," Wayne commented.

"*Lostech*... yes, that has quite the ring to it," Jefferson said, seemingly tasting the word. "So you'll understand why I ask for your stuff."

"I understand, Mister Jefferson, but it's not necessary." Wayne raised a hand to forestall protest. "As it happens, we've been running every test we can think of looking for hazardous levels of radiation and quite frankly, they're all coming up negative. From what my people can tell, any radiation hazards left over from the... the 'Rain of Fire' centuries ago have long since died away. The ruins are perfectly safe to visit... well as much as any ruins are."

"Safe? For real?" Jefferson said, surprised, awestruck, and... Wayne could have sworn that he just saw Jefferson's eyes change into dollar

signs, complete with the sound of a ringing cash register.

Suddenly Wayne wondered if he had made a mistake.

Old Capital City Ruins
New Dallas
Former Terran Hegemony

It was an odd procession of vehicles that wended its way through the debris choked streets of the ruined city. At the head was a bright orange muscle car originally built during the hey day of the Star League. Following it was a drab green humvee built in the closing years of the twentieth century. Following it was a flatbed HEMTT of the same vintage. And following them was a Javelin battlemech whose original build date was sometime in the depths of the Succession Wars.

Doctor Williams had to remind himself that this only looked strange to his Earthly sensibilities. Using disparate things together that had been built centuries apart from each other pretty much passed for normal in the Inner Sphere.

The lead vehicle pulled to a stop. Bob and Luke climbed out of the *General Li* as the others did the same behind them.

"Is there a problem?" Williams asked as he stepped out of the passenger side of the humvee.

"Naw, the place you want is just around the corner," Luke said, pointing to the appropriate corner. "We just gotta go on foot from here." He grinned and winked at Williams' driver, Major Sonja Delacruz. "Place is cursed, don't ya know."

"*Oh, that's ridiculous!*" the Javelin's current pilot, one Captain Howard Tiffany boomed over his external speakers. Without waiting for a reply his mech took one long stride for the corner.

"Wait..." Williams began.

Too late. Williams had barely begun when Tiffany's Javelin cleared

the corner. An instant later, a laser pulse seared itself into Williams' vision as the beam flashed through the void just between the mech's torso and arm, striking the ruin behind the mech in a thundering explosion.

As the people on the ground rushed for cover from the sudden raid of debris, Tiffany reacted instantly and backpedaled his mech out of line of sight of the shooter. He was partially successful, managing to get out of line of sight, but also tripping on a van sized piece of building that had been sitting in the middle of the street. The Javelin went over backwards and came down with a ground shaking crash.

"Tiffany! Are you okay?" Williams shouted.

"It missed me!" Tiffany replied over the loudspeaker, obviously shaken. "It was just three goddamned hundred meters away and it missed me! How the hell can it miss me?!"

"I'm telling ya'll, place is cursed," Luke commented with a laugh.

"Goddamn it, Tiffany, you better not have busted that mech!" Williams shouted. "If you have, if you so much as make another move without our say so you will no longer be a mech pilot, you hear? So help me God, if you endanger yourself or anyone else again, you will be spending the rest of your stay on New Dallas doing every shit duty imaginable and some I'll personally invent for you. Do you understand me, soldier?!"

"Clear, sir!"

"Okay," Williams said, calming down and turning to his local guides. "Now what was it that took a shot at Tiffany over there and how do we deal with it?"

Township of Al'Isard

"My friends," Jefferson began, addressing the assembled people of Al'Isard. "Thanks to our new friends from the stars here, we are entering a new age. The poisons that plague the Old Cities are gone. It is now safe to go and reclaim the lost... the lostech of our forebears

and reach new heights of prosperity.

"However, let's not just go rushing in," Jefferson went on. "Who knows how run down the Old Cities have become with the passing generations. We need to watch each other's backs after all, make sure everyone is safe, organize..."

"And you'll be doing the organizing, won't you Tycho?" one of the citizens jeered.

"Naturally, Jesse," Jefferson replied. If he noticed the sarcasm, he gave no sign of it. "I've spent my whole life organizing people. I ain't called 'Boss' for nothing."

"Sure, and I'll bet you'll charge a fee for anyone who wants to go," Jesse went on. "Lord forbid we just walk over there with our own two feet."

"Now, now, we are talking about the safety of the people going there..."

At this point, Wayne tuned out the argument starting over how to best loot the ruins. No one was paying any attention to him anyway and it wasn't really any of his business. And he really did need to check in with the rest of his people.

He stepped out of the Town Hall. His humvee was parked on the cobblestone street in front of it. Captain Petronova waited with it, surrounded by and apparently entertaining curious local children. She stood up to attention when she noticed his approach.

"It goes well, sir?" Petronova asked.

"At the moment, the people here seem more concerned with looting the ruins than attacking us," Wayne told her. "Of course, that doesn't mean that their people won't trip over ours while exploring, but at least we're not at the 'shoot on sight' level of relations." A large number of the Al'Isard citizens in the Town Hall had been carrying firearms if primitive ones that wouldn't have been out of place in the late 19th century, making Wayne think he was in the Old West rather

than on another planet. On the other hand, the planet was named 'New Dallas' after all. "Actually, I think I may have started a Gold Rush in there."

"Gold Rush, sir?"

"Yeah, only with lostech instead of gold," Wayne said. "Even if the locals don't realize it yet, they're going to have a problem with claim jumpers, armed robbery, and a flood of people from towns farther away looking to make a fortune."

"Oh, American history, correct?" Petronova asked. At Wayne's nod, she went on. "I'll admit that is not a specialty of mine, but I have watched a few Westerns."

"Unfortunately, I'm not seeing any way we can head this off," Wayne told her. "Anything come up while I was inside?"

"Nothing but the regular check in, sir," Petronova said. "But the children here have some interesting stories."

"Oh?"

"Yes, shortly after the 'Rain of Fire', people were trying to rebuild some semblance of civilization," Petronova told him. "But there was a problem with marauding gangs attacking communities and looting valuables. Civilization might have been totally lost right there, except that a single hero would often come out of nowhere, defeat the bandits, save the town, and presumably die heroically in the process. Except that this hero would show up in many places, save many towns, and defeat many gangs. This man is apparently idolized by the majority of New Dallas."

"This couldn't have been a bunch of different people doing the same thing in different places?" Wayne asked, not seeing the relevance to the present.

"Maybe," Petronova said doubtfully. "But this hero figure was named 'Max'."

Wayne stared at her incredulously. She smiled back.

"I watched those movies too, once," she added.

Old Capital City

"Doctor, this is crazy," Major Delacruz told Williams.

"Nonsense, Major," Williams replied as he double checked his gear, making sure everything was securely attached. "You heard what the boys said. That laser turret's got a dodgy targeting system. It's either too old or just not designed for shooting at people. As long as I don't present a stationary target, it can't hit me. We do need to get past it to get into the cache after all."

According to what Luke and Bob had to say and confirmed by the recording made by Tiffany's Javelin, the entrance to the Star League bunker was guarded by some kind of sentry turret with a laser. The area immediately in front of it was a kill zone as evidenced by the remains of several centuries old mechs littering it. But those same mech corpses provided perfect cover for people on foot if not for battlemechs and vehicles. The trick was simply to not expose yourself for too long; if you didn't, the turret simply couldn't hit you.

"Doctor, may I remind you that neither Luke nor Bob have actually ever tried entering the cache? The thing might get more accurate as you get closer to it," Delacruz pointed out. "But that wasn't my point. My point is that you're one of this expedition's leaders. Someone else should run the gauntlet. Let me do it."

"Low man – or woman – on the totem pole, Major?" Williams shook his head. "No way, not this time. If it becomes necessary to hack the computers to shut off that turret, I'm the one most qualified to do it." He turned around, facing the open area where the kill zone was. The first shelter should be off to his immediate right. "Okay, wish me luck."

He took off at a sprint.

The laser blast scored the ground a twenty meters from his position,

the beam passing more than a meter above his head and several meters behind him. The second shot struck after he reached the sheltering bulk of a downed mech that was far too mangled for Williams to identify. Taking a breather, Williams cautiously made his way to his left before sprinting again to the next mech.

The next two sprints went much the same way, with Williams occasionally having to shift course due to the lasers hitting the ground in front of him. But the biggest problem was the last hundred meters; there were no more sheltering wrecks in the kill zone.

"Okay, this ain't a problem," Williams said aloud, trying to convince himself. "I just have to zig zag and it can't hit me, right? Right?"

The wreck seemed unimpressed, but said nothing.

"Okay, one, two, THREE!"

Williams ran for all that he was worth, dodging laser beams for all that he was worth. He was pretty fit, exercised regularly, especially on the trip out from Earth. But he was also weighted down with gear that hadn't felt so heavy when he started out. And it didn't help that the laser seemed to hit closer and closer with every shot. But he was almost there to the entrance. Fifty meters. Forty. Thirty. Twenty...

At about ten meters, Williams tripped over an unseen pothole and went sprawling practically right in front of the laser turret. Looking up, he froze as he saw the energy weapon zero right in on his position. His life practically flashed right before his eyes.

"Bzzzt! I'm sorry," the laser turret suddenly said with a voice that sounded a lot like the late Majel Barrett Roddenberry. "But your ten thousand shot demonstration of the GM Sentinel 2800 has expired. To fully activate this system, please contact your nearest General Motors sales representative and purchase an authorized activation code."

"Son of a bitch," Williams muttered as he got up and dusted himself off. He made a mental note to write an apology to certain software distributors back on Earth. Suddenly, certain business practices didn't look as bad as they used to.

GDI Training Grounds, Outskirts of Port Krin
Antallos, Periphery
January 5, 2007/3022

Standing in the shade of a canopy that someone had fortunately erected to try and ward off the blazing sun that shown upon Antallos, Major Andreas Staedele of the Buron Cavalry raised his field glasses up to his eyes. Looking out onto the training ground he saw a number of fresh volunteers from Port Krin and the other city-states on Antallos going through a basic fitness evaluation. This was the second round of testing for this batch as the GDI Foreign Legion had already chosen the best recruits from the initial batch since GDI command had given the Legion first pick. Right now it was the turn of the Buron Cavalry to see if they wanted to pick up any fresh faces. Truth be told, Andreas already had his eye on a few new people that the Legion had not picked up, two of them even had their own Mechs. The biggest problem though was the loyalty he felt to the Cav.

After getting shoved through the meat grinder that had been the battle with the 21st Galedon Regulars it had taken every last C-Bill to the Cav's name to get the unit back into a fighting condition and after that the contracts had dried up causing the monetary crisis that had forced the Buron Cavalry out into the Periphery. Unable to pay some of his troops and facing a long stay in the Periphery, Andreas had been forced to let a good number of men and women buy out of their contracts. He hadn't been surprised that some wanted out, especially considering that the Periphery was often the place merc units down on their luck went off to die either slowly due to a lack of supplies and money or quickly by fighting pirates or becoming pirates themselves. No, what had surprised him was that a number of old friends, men and women he had considered to be family, had decided to leave and take their chances solo back on Galatea rather than out in the Periphery.

However, since the ill-fated attempt at invasion of Earth and the hiring of the Buron Cavalry by President Jack Ryan things had finally started looking up for the Cav. Money was no longer as great of an issue and getting parts and supplies for the Mechs and vehicles as well as for his people had turned out to be far easier than he had

imagined. What was even more surprising was the fact that the United States of America, who held the Buron's contract even if it was currently on loan to the GDI, had not tried to 'Company Store' them like a number of people and groups back in the Successor states would've. Sure the Cav wasn't close to the level it was before tangling with the 21st, but it was getting better everyday and gaining strength far faster than Staedele had ever dreamed possible. Things were going so good that he had even sent messages to Galatea to see if any of the former Cav members wanted to hire back on. Of course he had needed to get permission from his employers for this first, but he had understood why. Earth was a sorely tempting target for anyone who thought they had what it took to come in and grab it. Security was paramount to protect the world, unspoiled by the fires of the Succession wars as it was, and that meant keeping any potential troublemakers and spies away as long as possible.

"Not the prettiest looking bunch I've ever seen," Captain Celic 'Ned' Nedeljko commented from where he stood next to Staedele. "But then we aren't lining 'em up for a beauty pageant now are we."

Andreas nodded in agreement. Most of the men and the few women out there were rather sloppy and unfit, not having had to do basic training in years or ever. Their looks weren't that great either.

"Bah," Captain Marc Johnson growled from the other side of Staedele. "Give me a few weeks with them or even time with some of the drill instructors back home and they'll be in shape enough to at least not accidentally shoot one another."

"Or us," Celic offered with a smirk. "I'd hate to have come all this way, survived a nuclear death trap, and finally gotten to see the Cav start growing again only to wind up KIA because of friendly fire. Just think of how that would play out in the news back home..." "Tragedy struck today when the heroic and handsome Celic 'Ned' Nedeljko was accidentally shot by a *hick* the Buron Cavalry had hired on at Antallos. Loved by his friends and comrades, Nedeljko was..."

Staedele tried his best to tune out humorous obituary that Ned was composing for himself, he tried even harder not to laugh when he heard a few of the 'choice' words Marc quietly spoke at how Celic was

describing himself. However, at the same time Andreas Staedele was also slightly troubled by what both men had inadvertently said. Both had referred to Earth not as *Earth* but rather as *home*. Staedele had been discussing similar slips of the tongue with his wife over the last few days as Marie had also noticed many of the Cav's members referring to the wayward planet in a more familiar and loving tone than what should've been expected.

Would he one day start referring to Earth as home? Would he even notice if he did? And what about his daughter Esther and the other children of the Cav who were currently back on Earth? Were they going to start thinking of it as home? Did they already think of it as such, for that matter? He had heard of merc groups turning local and/or becoming House units, but....

Giving a quick shake of his head to try and clear away the somewhat confusing thoughts Staedele turned his attention back to the potential recruits he was supposed to be evaluating. If someday a choice needed to be made then he would make it then and there, not before. Whatever happened though, the Buron Cavalry would stick together, *that* he promised himself.

"Ah there's my boy."

Pulling his binoculars down Andreas turned slightly to look towards Nedeljko who had spoken. The man was currently following a group of volunteers who were running through the makeshift obstacle course that the GDI had setup. Though the GDI Foreign Legion had gotten first pick Staedele had still sent his XO to check out the first round to see if the Legion might pass over a few diamonds in the rough. Apparently they had.

"Which one is he," Marc Johnson asked, turning his own binoculars towards where Celic was indicating.

"He's the kid with the unkempt brown hair currently coming up to the first wall," the XO of the Buron Cavalry stated, "the skinny looking one."

"They're all kind of....," Johnson began to say but paused before

speaking in slight surprise, "Wow, look at 'im climb. Kid's got to be part squirrel or something."

Turning his own binoculars towards the object of his two subordinates interest Staedele was a bit surprised to see the young man in question. Moving rapidly the brown haired boy was making short work of the walls and other obstacles placed before him. How'd this kid *not* get picked up by the Legion?

"Do we have a name for him?" Staedele asked, the first time he had spoke since he begun observing the potential recruits.

"Yeah, got it right here....," Ned spoke as he picked up a clipboard from a nearby table. "Name's Cody...John J. Cody. Age 19 years Terran standard, height 1.7 meters, weight 68.3 kilograms. Small little guy, ain't he? Applying to be a Mechwarrior, but has experience as a tech working in his family's salvage business. Doesn't have his own Mech but isn't listed as being dispossessed either. Based on that and his apparent age I'd say he's never actually piloted one in combat before. Says here that he passed the written exam with 83% correct and passed the physical fitness course with a...94% rating. His sim scores are fairly average, but then if he hasn't been able to pilot all that much then he will probably get better with more experience."

Staedele frowned as he listened to the stats being read off. This... Cody was pretty darn good, far better than many of the other applicants. So why hadn't the GDI picked him up for the Legion?

"What's his background say?" the leader of the Buron Cavalry asked.

Flipping a page Celic grunted, "Huh, that's odd. The kid only listed the Federated Suns as his origin, left nearly most of the other entries blank. Didn't write down a whole lot else except for a few details regarding his experience working as a tech.... Oh...."

"Oh, what?" Andreas asked, already having a good guess in his mind but waiting for Celic to confirm it or not.

"There's a note here from the GDI Intel boys," the XO of the Cav said calmly. "Says the reason he wasn't picked up by the Legion was

because of his lack of background info and the suspicion that he lied on his application and during the initial interview. They say that they think he might be a potential 'plant' sent from one of the Successor States."

"Can't be," Marc Johnson remarked with a scowl, "Spooks know better than to try and stick out this much. If he was supposed to be a spy the kid would've filled in every entry perfectly and have an airtight story behind him."

Staedele silently nodded his head in agreement. The few spooks he had encountered back in the Sphere had always tried to be as slick as possible when dealing with him and people not directly in their chain of command. There was the possibility that this kid was a spy and simply using the reverse tactic of trying to provide as little information as possible in the hopes of tricking his way in but.... No, if he was to make a bet it would be that this John Cody was most likely hiding something personal out of the fear it would get him turned away. Still....

"Anything on there from Dandel or Hale?" Andreas asked, knowing that either officer, most likely both, had probably interviewed the kid during his evaluation with the Legion.

"Not really," Celic remarked as he flipped through a few more pages to see if he had missed anything. "Just says that they met with him. There's nothing about why they didn't pick him up."

Moving his left hand up to his chin to rub it as he thought, Andreas Staedele used his right hand to place his binoculars back into the small pouch he wore on his belt. If neither Hale nor Dandel had listed anything for this guy, what did that mean? The two usually left at least some inkling as to why a candidate had been rejected...or at least that was the impression he had gotten when he skimmed through some of the paperwork on the ride out to the testing grounds.

"What do you want to do?" Marc asked, looking only slightly away from the group he had been watching.

"Ned, have him come in for a 'meet and greet'," the leader of the Buron Cavalry said, deciding he'd talk with this John J. Cody before making a full decision. "I'll be in the tent waiting. Marc...."

"I'll keep my eyes open out here," the leader of the Cav's infantry stated, turning his binoculars back to watch the groups of potential recruits as his boss walked towards large tent set up nearby.

Walking briskly in order to avoid being out of the shade and in the burning Antallos sun for too long. Major Andreas Staedele was never happier then when he got to the portal of the large, sandy colored tent. Feeling the coolness of air-conditioning hit him as he opened the actual door that had been installed into the tent, the CO of the Buron Cavalry let out a contented sigh.

Honestly, the folks from Earth really did have some of the best toys. Forget for a moment all of the fancy electronics and computers that they had in abundance, forget the multitude of vehicles he had seen on the streets back on Earth, and forget the fact that they could not only replicate technology he had grown up with, and yet still barely understood at times, but also improve upon it. No, right now the thing he found most marvelous was this tent.

The Deployable Rapid Assembly Shelter or DRASH for short had been invented by the Americans, Staedele had found out, after they had fought a number of engagements in the deserts of Earth and had found that their old tents were simply too heavy, bulky, and hot to be carted out around and set up easily. The DRASH was easily divided up between a team of 6 or even 4 soldiers and then could be rapidly assembled almost anywhere it was taken. Even more impressive Staedele found was the fact that the tents could be linked together to form larger command centers and that electrical generators could easily be incorporated with the tents. But then such a thing would be necessary the man recognized, seeing as how lights, computers, and, best of all, air-conditioning had been thought to be things that that would be beneficial and necessary for a tent that could serve as a full command post. Oh the Inner Sphere had its share of command tents and mobile command posts Staedele knew, seeing as how he had been in many of them before, but none of them were as easily made, assembled, transported, or modified as the DRASH was. The things

were even sealed to protect against biological and chemical attacks, though with the Ares Conventions such attacks were a remote possibility, but then nuclear attacks were also *supposed* to be unlikely and he had seen firsthand more nuclear blasts in the course of a single day than any other person outside of the First Succession War had.

"I've got to look into seeing if they'll let us buy a few," the Major noted to himself as he found the foldout armchair near a folding table that a GDI soldier had set up for him upon his arrival earlier in the day.

Nodding to the GDI soldier that handed him a cold canteen of water from the fairly good-sized refrigerator that hummed on one side of the tent, something else that Staedele greatly appreciated seeing as they were on a hot and dry desert world, Staedele watched the GDI personnel go about their business checking over the paperwork generated by the numerous applicants who toiled outside in the hot sun. Sipping the water in the canteen slowly the CO of the Buron Cavalry didn't have to wait long before the door to the tent opened and in walked Celic Nedeljko followed by a rather hot, tired, and amazed looking John J. Cody. Watching the young man follow the older Mechwarrior, Staedele noted that Cody was much smaller than he initially thought he was, not just shorter but thinner as well.

"Mr. Cody, please, sit," the leader of the Buron Cavalry stated as he indicated the foldout chair across from him that was empty. "It's pretty hot out there. Care for some water?"

The young man stood uneasy for a moment before taking a seat and then nodded his head in the affirmative. Only a moment later Captain Celic Nedeljko handed the red faced 'recruit' a fresh canteen, the brown haired young man nearly dropping it as he flinched at the sudden cold touching his hot skin.

"Thank ya' kindly, Ser," the tired and terribly anxious Cody drawled before taking a sip from the canteen.

Watching the young man drink the water down steadily Staedele leaned back slightly in his chair. 'Ned' had gotten a canteen for

himself as well and was now standing just behind young John Cody. They weren't anticipating any trouble from the brown haired 'recruit', but then it never hurt to be cautious.

"I saw you out there on the obstacle course, Cody. You were moving through it pretty well, managed to even impress Marc Johnson my infantry commander. That's not an easy thing to do," Andreas stated calmly as he looked into the brown eyes of the young man in front of him.

"T's just was doing what came natural, Ser," John Cody stated, his slow accent bleeding through heavily. "Twas nuthin to it really."

"Hmm," the Major hummed before saying, "I'll get straight to the point. Your test scores are better than to be expected for Port Krin and Antallos, your listed and demonstrated skills are impressive, and you seem to be a fairly confident Mechpilot. However, the GDI didn't want you in the Legion. Why should I want you in the Buron Cavalry?"

Swallowing the water in his mouth Cody took a moment before answering, "As you say'd it Ser, I's got skills ya'll are looking for. Can't right tell you why the...."

"Cut the crap!" Andreas growled forcefully as he stared into the eyes of the young man across from him. "You know what I'm asking you. No one with your skills and potential gets passed over without a damn good reason. By all rights you should probably already be in a merc unit or pirate group, but you aren't. Instead you come looking to join the GDI's Foreign Legion and when that doesn't work you look to their mercenaries, mercenaries like me. Now this gets me curious. Why would someone like you come here looking to get in with us when you could easily get into somewhere else?"

Shaking slightly underneath the gaze of the Major, John Cody tried to reply, "Is 'cause I don't got no Mech of my o-...."

"Bullshit!" Celic Nedeljko stated forcefully, joining in on the conversation as he knew what Andreas was trying to do. "Mech or no, any number of the groups out in the Periphery would've picked you

up...even if it was only for your abilities and experience as a tech. You know what we think? We think you're some kind of spy...an agent sent here to gather intel on the GDI. The GDI think that too. So are you? Are you a *spy*?!"

"I ain't no spy, Ser!" the brown haired recruit responded quickly and heatedly.

"Then what are you?" Major Staedele asked, leaning forward in his seat ever so slightly, all the while looking for the hint of a lie. "Your file says you're from the FedSuns, but your accent isn't from the Draconis March or even the closer provinces of the Crucis March. You could be from the Capellan March or the lower part of the Crucis March, but that still leaves the question of how you got all the way out here to Antallos."

"I...I...", the young man stuttered, the look on his face a mixture of anger, embarrassment, and...reticence?

"Tell us the truth kid," 'Ned' said, as he crossed his arms and stood firmly behind the seated recruit. "If you do we promise that we'll make certain tha-...."

"I can't!" John Cody nearly shouted, interrupting the older Mechwarrior. "If...if I tells.... If I tells ya the truth then ya'll send me away! Jus' like dem Legion fellas did!"

"Not necessarily," Andreas calmly replied, deciding that the young man needed only one more 'push' to tell them everything. "However, if you don't tell us the truth then you most assuredly will get rejected...and most likely taken in for questioning by the GDI as to whether or not you are a spy. The GDI aren't a cruel bunch, but they also aren't ones to take chances with their security."

Sitting there in the chair under the close scrutiny of the two Buron Cavalry officers, John J. Cody felt himself fidget as his emotions and thoughts warred with one another over what he should do. Looking around the tent the brown haired young man noticed that many of the GDI personnel and soldiers present were looking over at him either openly or somewhat discreetly. Feeling the eyes of nearly

everyone present burning into him the young man's thought flashed to the all the stories that he had heard of spies and interrogations as well as thinking about the possible consequences to him if they should decide he was a spy.

"Ah-...alright. I'sa tells you the truth," the young man with the unkempt brown hair said quietly.

"Good," Staedele commented, his plan having worked. "Why don't you tell us where you're from exactly?"

Swallowing the lump in his throat Cody replied nervously, "Ridgebrook...down yonder in the Capellan March."

Hearing the name of the planet 'Ned' let out a low whistle, "That's near the border with the Concordat. You're a long way from home."

Seeing the nervous young man nod slowly in agreement Andreas spoke, "That's a prefecture capitol. What did you do their and why would you come all the way out here to Antallos?"

"Mah...mah family runs a salvage business back on Ridgebrook. We's pretty well off, what with salvaging Mechs Duke Hasek-Davion wants, but Gran-dad likes to keep us all somewhat grounded so we's know where we's come from," Cody stated, the explanation giving a hint as to why his accent was so thick seeing as how he had been born and raised on a prefecture capital. "Mah Ma just took over when Gran-dad retired not more than two years past."

"So I guess that explains why you know so much about Mechs and can be called a tech," Celic noted as he crossed his arms back over his chest.

Giving a swift nod John replied, "Yessuah, mah Ma had me with her nearly every day when she was working in 'The Shop'. Same fer my older sis, 'Lizabeth."

"Alright, so answers where you're from, what you did, some of who your family is, and such," Staedele said as he made notes to have GDI intel look into later. "But that doesn't explain why you're out here on

Antallos. If you were looking to pilot a Mech and see combat I'd suspect you wouldn't have had much trouble joining the Capellan March Militia unit stationed on Ridgebrook or maybe even gotten into a spot with one of the more prestigious March units. If you were looking to become a mercenary...well Galatea and the other reputable hiring halls are nowhere near Antallos. Hell, even if you wanted to be a pirate, there are far closer places for you to go."

Celic 'Ned' Nedeljko nodded in agreement with his commander. If the kid wanted to join up with a pirate band then the Pirates' Haven cluster was far closer. Heck, even the Tortuga Dominions would have been a shorter trip than getting all the way out to Antallos and Port Krin. Something wasn't adding up, heck a few things weren't adding up.

"So I'll ask you again," Major Staedele sternly said, "Why are you out here on Antallos?"

"I...I...", the young man stuttered, his nervousness having increased again. "I.... Is 'cause o' mah Da. I'ma looking for my Da."

Hearing this, both Andreas and Celic saw Cody's shoulders slump in defeat. The young man was either the best actor they had ever seen or he was the honestly telling them the truth now. It was time to find out which it was.

"Your father?" Celic asked, looking for any sign of deceit. "Why would you be all the way out here looking for your father? Wouldn't he be back home working in the company salvage business?"

"No Ser." John Cody stated confidently. "Mah Da was a Mechwarrior. Deh best the Ridgebrook CMM ever done saw. He could make his Centurion dance to a fiddle if someone got to the mind of play'en. He disappeared though...during a pirate raid."

"But why would you come out here looking for him?" Andreas asked, legitimately confused. "If he was in the Ridgebrook CMM and was lost in a pirate attack he'd more likely be in the Confederation, the Concordat, the Pirates' Haven, or even in someplace like the Magistracy of Canopus or the Tortuga Dominions. Raiders down in

that neck of the woods don't come all the way out *here* to sell off spoils or slaves."

"Dat's 'causin he wasn't lost back on Ridgebrook," the young John Cody replied firmly. "He got lost fight'n out on Kesai IV."

"Kesai IV?!" Captain 'Ned' Nedeljko stated, slightly dumfounded by the name of the planet that had just been mentioned. "That's all the way up in the Draconis March! Hell, it sits right on the border with the *fucking* Combine! What in the Sam-Hell was he doing all the way out there if he was in the *Capellan March Militia*?!"

Major Andreas Staedele also wanted to know the answer to that. Sure, there had been scuttlebutt back when the Buron Cavalry had been in the Federated Suns that there was an idea floating about regarding trying to pull off massive interstellar war games..., but still? How did a Mechwarrior in the Ridgebrook CMM find his way up to the Draconis March? Sure Davion did like to shift troops around, but those with regional loyalties usually stayed in their home Marches. The only ones who ever had the potential to actually be shifted over to a different March were some of the elite combat units, not a March Militia unit. This just didn't make any sense.

"I think you better start at the beginning, son," Andreas Staedele stated coolly, his calmness a mask hiding the confusion he felt.

"Well 'twas like this see," John Cody began to explain. "Duke Hasek-Davion had to send his 8th Syrtis Fusiliers up to the Drac border about three years ago on account of the First Prince re-requesting it, seeing as how the Draconis March Militia wasn't doing too good and the Prince was getting pressured by them Sandovals."

Celic and Andreas both nodded in understanding 3 years ago was roughly 3019/3020 and the Dracs had been running a number of raids over the border giving the Draconis March fits. The Sandovals hated the Combine with a passion as it was and Duke Aaron Sandoval, the current head of the March, had been incensed at that time over the raids. Sandoval had called for more troops on the border in order to launch his own raids back into the Combine's territory. The Buron Cavalry had answered that call and made good

money from it up until they had tangled with the 21st Galedon Regulars as their contract was coming up for renewal. He remembered the report around that time telling how a few Capellan March units and a few Crucis March units were being sent up to help out as well, but he couldn't recall the names of the specific units being sent. However, that didn't explain why a member of the CMM was out on the border when the Fusiliers had been sent.

"You said that the Duke had to send the 8th Syrtis Fusiliers," Andreas voiced the question that was suddenly bothering him. "How did your father, a member of the Ridgebrook CMM, get sent along with them?"

"Well...", the brown haired young man hesitated slightly. "Y'all know how there's supposing to be some bad blood between the Duke and the Prince? Well, the Duke apparently didn't wanna send the Fusiliers t'all, but then that there would've looked a might bit peculiar and disloyal, him refusin' a re-request from the Prince backed by them Sandovals."

Once again both Andreas Staedele and Celic Nedeljko nodded in understanding and agreement. While neither man had ever met Hanse Davion or Michael Hasek-Davion it was not really a big secret that there was tension between the two. Supposedly it had started when First Prince Ian Davion had been killed by Yorinaga Kurita. Hanse, Ian's younger brother, had been named as heir to the throne in the event of Ian's demise should he not have a child and proper heir born of wedlock. Hanse's right to succession had been challenged only by Michael Hasek-Davion, the Duke of New Syrtis, head of the Capellan March, and husband of Hanse and Ian's half sister, Marie Davion-St. Claire. No one but a few people high up in the FedSuns' government knew the exact details of what had occurred, but in the end it was plain as day that whatever had happened had left the two as less than friendly rivals. Oh sure, both men acted civilly with one another in front of the vids, but what was seen by the public was not what was always happening in private and it always seemed that when one man did something grand the other had to do something just a bit more spectacular.

"So how does your father fit into all of this?" Ned asked, voicing the question that Andreas also wanted answered.

"Well...Duke Hasek-Davion did as he was re-requested...well, sorta anyway," Cody stated, his tone lowering slightly as if he was revealing a big secret. "Ya see Duke Hasek-Davion sent out'ta call to all of the March Militias sayin' that they needed to send a company of the best Mechwarriors, pilots, and infantry. Ya see he was...."

"He was creating a dummy unit to send in place of the 8th Syrtis Fusiliers," Andreas Staedele interrupted, reaching the conclusion without Cody having to actually say it. "A bunch of smaller units from the militias...not enough to weaken the garrison on his worlds but enough to constitute an under-strength RCT. Let me guess, he put a few officers in charge of the unit and called it the 8th Syrtis Fusiliers Auxiliaries or something like that."

"Yessuah," John Cody nodded, looking a bit relieved that he didn't have to say it. "Or at least that 'twas what we's was told. From things mah Gran-dad and Ma talked 'bout the March Milita had done been told that a new unit was being formed to protect the March from the Cappies."

"But instead Hasek-Davion gets to keep his Fusiliers where they are while sending a Fusiliers unit just like the First Prince asked," Celic interjected with a look of disgust at the underhanded tactic. "I bet the officers he sent from the actual 8th were those he didn't consider to be *loyal* enough to him."

"Maybe," the leader of the Buron Cavalry commented. "But if he did this then how come we're just hearing about it now. I can't think that Hanse Davion or the Sandovals wouldn't have noticed, but it is possible. If the unit was already en route or arriving on station when the deception was noticed there probably wasn't a whole lot that could do about it at the time. The Draconis March needed reinforcing and these were fresh troops they were getting, just not the exact ones they had asked for and been promised. Still...."

"It was probably some political backroom dealing that kept it from coming out and making them all look stupid," Nedeljko offered with a frown considering the same type of dealing had put the Buron Cavalry on the chopping block and into such tight monetary straits.

"Michael probably got a slap on the wrist and a stern, 'don't do it again', while Hanse and the Sandovals got some sort of concession or other in return."

"Hmmm," Andreas hummed in agreement. "So I take it from what you've told us so far that your father made it to Kesai IV and then things went bad."

Giving a sharp nod the brown haired young man replied, "Yessuah, though I don't right know the details of what happened mah Ma and Gran-dad got a message from the AFFC saying that mah Da was Missing-in-Action after Kesai got raided. Said 'twas pirates who'd done it, that they'd come looking to take advantage of the chaos and confusion the Dracs caused. It tore mah Ma up sumthing fierce getting that news."

Major Andreas Staedele nodded in understanding. In the course of this career he had written and recorded a number of messages to inform the families of fallen Buron Cavalry members that their loved one had died or was missing and presumed dead. It was hard enough just thinking of what to say one of those messages, remembering how it was to actually receive one was.... With the command of the Burons being a family legacy Andreas Staedele knew exactly what it felt like to learn that a loved one was not coming home, that they had fallen in battle or worse...were simply gone. Now that he thought about it the Major felt old doubts and fears suddenly remerge, thoughts and feelings that chilled his core and made his stomach twist into knots. God, what would it be like for Marie or Esther if they got a letter from the GDI saying he was KIA or MIA? Marie would probably already know before any formal message since she was the Chief Tech and traveled with the Cav everywhere, but still.... What about Esther, what would his little girl think and feel and do?

Shaking his head slightly to try and get rid of the troubling thought, the leader of the Buron Cavalry asked, "What makes you think your father got carted off by the pirates? Or that he is even still alive?"

"Mah Da was a great Mechwarrior! He wouldn't let no dirty ol' pirate lick'em unless he's was outnumbered or sumthing!" John J. Cody fired

back quickly and with a bit of anger crawling into his voice. "They didn't find his body nowhere or any trace of his Mech! He had to have been taken by the pirates 'cause he'd never just run from a fight! Mah Da is a great man! I know he's alive! I just knows it!"

"Okay, okay, calm down there son," Celic intervened as the young man started getting hysterical. "We didn't mean to imply that your father is dead. It's just that...."

"People who come out into the Periphery looking for miracles usually only find disappointment and death," Andreas finished what Celic had not been able to say. "What makes you think that your father would have come to Antalllos anyways? If he got captured by the pirates that raided Kesai IV then he could be on any number of worlds on this side of the Periphery."

Cody nodded, his brown hair falling down into his eyes, "I left home, a year an' a half ago this May. I hopped a freighter head'n out to the Draconis March and landed on Mayetta two months later. It took me three months to find a ship heading for Kesai IV, but they wouldn't take me on and I couldn't sneak aboard so I had to wait another three to find one that 'twas heading out that way and take me on as a tech. It took me two weeks to get to Kesai IV and I then spent the next week and three months talking to every person who'd seen the fight. All I got was that mah Da went out and didn't come back. Then I heard a rumor in the spaceport that the pirates who'd raided Kesai had been spotted eleven months earlier headin' to Antalllos and sumthing about 'a big score'."

Andreas frowned at that little tid bit of info. That was almost the time period when the planning for the invasion of Earth had started and the pirates had started to gather for it. Had the group that Cody was looking for gone to Earth?

"Cody, the name of the pirate group you were trying to track, what was it?" the Major asked, hoping that he may be wrong.

"They's was callin' themselves 'The Black Lightning Raiders', Ser," John answered quickly. "Why?"

"Just checking to see if the Cav or the GDI may have bumped into them," Ned interjected before Andreas could. "I don't recall hearing them mentioned amongst the pirates we and the GDI have tangled with so far."

"You wouldn't Ser," Cody offered punctually. "It took me a month to find a ship and then two months of hopping 'round the Outworlds Alliance before arriving on Antallos 'bout three months ago. I's spent everyday asking 'bout them and everyone I talked to's done told me that 'The Black Lightning Raiders' were on Antallos 'til January last year, they's got here the end of August jus' before that and did some minor raiding out on the Combine, but now they've just up and disappeared again. I figure that with this GDI and such in control of Antallos they ain't coming back seeing's how them GDI folks don't take too kindly to pirates and criminals."

"They don't at that," Nedeljko chuckled darkly as he recalled the nuclear greeting the pirate fleet had received upon arrival at Earth.

"Yeah," the brown haired young man nodded, "So's I figures that they probably moved to one of the systems nearby maybe and since them GDI folks are cleaning up the Periphery my best chance of finding them is by signing on with the GDI or one of their mercs."

Major Andreas Staedele sat back in his chair and let out a puff of air as he began to think the story over. The kid had heart, he'd give him that, and a good dose of courage for coming so far on his own. He even felt sorry for the kid slightly. He knew what it was like to lose the father you looked up to. The only problem was what would the kid do if they actually came across these 'Black Lightning Raiders'? People hired for the Buron Cavalry had to be dependable and trustworthy, the reputation of the unit depended upon it. If the kid went off on a vengeance kick or simply up and left after hearing some rumor or other, well....

"Alright Cody I need to ask you a question and before you answer you have to know this," Andreas stated clearly and sternly. "The Buron Cavalry are mercenaries and we may fight for money. However, we have our pride and reputation to consider and those are dependent upon our trustworthiness and reliability. Without those we aren't

worth anything and for the members of the Cav our word is our bond. Now, knowing that, I want you to be completely honest with me. If we do run into these pirates you're looking for, what are you going to do? I know you want to find your father, but I can't have you putting this unit or its employer in danger because you suddenly go irrational on us. I need to know that I can trust you."

"You can count on me Ser," the young John J. Cody spoke solemnly. "Mah Da told me before he left after my thirteenth birthday that, 'a man is only as good as his word and that a man is judged by the actions that he does and does not take'. If I went and betrayed them principles then how could I look mah Da in the eye when I find'im?"

Staedele smiled slightly as he heard the young man with the unkempt brown hair give him his answer. Looking up at Ned he saw that the other man also had a small smile at those words. However, before he spoke to tell John J. Cody that the Buron Cavalry would be hiring him on Andreas caught the sight of Celic Nedeljko's smile turning straight into a frown.

"Wait a minute," the XO of the Buron Cavalry stated suddenly. "On your application you listed your age as being 19 years-old according to the Terran standard, but you just said that your father left after your 13th birthday. If you were...."

"Did I's say thirteenth?" Cody suddenly said, a nervous little smile curling up the edges of his mouth. "Sorry 'bout that. I meant to say sixteenth on the account of the diff...."

Andreas Staedele recognized a lie when he heard it and immediately cut the 'boy' off with, "Don't lie to me kid. I *thought* we already established that. How old are you really?"

Worrying his lip slightly as he felt the stares of the two men bearing down on him John Cody finally answered, "I...I.... Sixteen Ser. But's I's be turning seventeen middle o' next month and that's the Lord's honest truth Ser! Major Dansel and Major Hale said that they couldn't sign me up 'cause my age, but they said that the Buron Cavalry wouldn't have the same restriction. I can pilot and shoot as well as any man grown can. Please Ser! I'm sorry I's lied to ya'll but you folks

are mah best hope right now finding mah Da!"

Leaning forward slightly Andreas suddenly realized from the boy's words why exactly Dansel and Hale hadn't written anything down about their interview with the kid, those cheeky bastards! GDI regulations stated that official GDI units couldn't recruit anyone under the age of 17 Terran Standard years, but that 18 years was the preferred minimum age requirement because at 17 years the applicant needed the expressed written consent of a legal parent or a legal guardian or a special dispensation from a recognized Court of Law. With the only real Court of Law on Antallos being the one set up by the CSN and GDI to handle the numerous criminal trials of pirates and the criminals that they couldn't tolerate it would've been difficult for the boy to get a Court order to allow entry into the Legion since the Court was currently backed up just from handling the affairs from after the takeover. Besides, there was no way they'd allow a kid who was still legally sixteen and on a quest to find his father to join a combat unit that was being staffed with types to be found on Antallos, even if those recruits were the better ones both morally and skill wise. However, even if the Buron Cavalry could technically recruit someone that didn't meet the age requirements of the GDI it didn't mean that Staedele would. There was still the reputation of the Cav to consider and the fact that the kid had lied twice rather than simply tell him the truth from the start.

"You say you're telling us the truth, but how do we know that? You already lied to us at east twice by my count, how do we know that this isn't another lie?" Celic questioned sternly, the usually mirthful man showing no signs of joking around. "What about what your father said about a man being only as good as his word and about how he is known and judged by the actions he does and does not take? Hmmm, well?"

"I...I...I'm sorry Ser honest I am, but I didn't know if I's could trust the Majors. I swear to you, *this* ain't no lie!" young John Cody blurted out defensively.

"Oh yeah?!" Celic stated disbelievingly. "What about your family back home, huh? What about them? Did you even tell them that you were leaving on this mad journey of yours?"

"I...I," the sixteen year-old stuttered slightly, "I.... No Ser, I.... They don't know. Ma and Gran-dad would'da never 'llowed me to leave if I told them. They were torn up sumthing fierce 'bout mah Da and all... I...I didn't wanna burden them more."

"Jesus," the XO of the Buron Cavlary swore. "Have you even thought about what they must be feeling knowing he's missing and you're God knows where?! You've been concentrating so much on your father you've forgotten what family you do have."

"I...I guess so.... But I gotta find'em, at least know if he's live or dead...sumthing!" the boy said before getting out of the chair and actually getting on his knees. "Please Ser! I know I done ya'll wrong by lying, but please.... Please, don't.... Even if it is only as a tech, even if it's only as a laborer or servant.... Please Ser, give me a chance to find mah Da or at least make restitution to ya'll!"

Staedele felt his face flush with embarrassment as the kid begged him on his knees. Around the tent he knew that work had come to a halt and everyone was staring at the scene taking place. Worse of all was that no matter his decision word would spread through the ranks of the GDI and probably reach General Davis and Colonel Kurita. He didn't relish the idea of being questioned about why he had turned the boy away or why he had hired him on. No matter what stories would be told and rumors would circulate. Worse of all Marie would know by the end of the...no, forget the end of the day, she'd probably know within the next hour and be down here questioning him shortly afterwards...that or she'd be waiting for him back at the *Distant Home*.

He hated this. It was like the damn 'La Mancha' scenario that the various Mechwarrior Academies throughout the Sphere used to train cadets. No matter what he did he'd still lose somehow, the only question remaining was how badly he would lose.

"Kid...", the leader of the Buron Cavalry began before seeing that the young recruit was still on his knees blabbering away apologies. Frustrated by it all Andreas growled, "Damn it Cody, pull yourself together for Christ's sake!"

Those harsh words cut into the boy and stopped his blabbering almost immediately. Rising up swiftly the boy came to a perfect position of attention before responding, "Ser! Sorry Ser! I's forgot myself and have shamed ya'll and the Buron Cavalry! With your permission Ser...."

Andreas recognized what was being left unsaid. John J. Cody was giving him a perfect way out if he wanted to dismiss the boy. The question was if he should take it or not. Gaining a tech who knew what they were doing was essential for a unit like the Cav. And out here in the Periphery, well...the earth boys and girls were good and learned quickly, he'd give them that, but the Cav needed their own people and needed those people to know exactly what to do, how to do it, and to do it when it was needed most.

Looking over to his XO, the leader of the Buron Cavalry saw Celic Nedeljko give a subtle nod. God, the conversations later with Marc, Marie, and the GDI command were going to be bothersome.

"Recruit Cody," Major Andreas Staedele stated in a perfect command tone. "After much consideration I, Major Andreas Staedele, as the CO of the Buron Cavalry, have decided that you will be offered a *probationary* contract with the Buron Cavalry as a junior technician."

Blinking in surprise John Cody was silent for a moment before bursting out and exclaiming, "Ser! Thank you Ser! Ya'll shan't regret it! I's promise I-...."

"The *Major* did not give you permission to speak *Recruit* Cody!" Celic thundered as he interrupted the jubilant boy. "The Buron Cavalry may be mercenaries but we still respect and observe the chain of command. Do you understand that Recruit Cody!"

"Yes Ser!" Cody returned immediately, his eyes staring straight ahead as he stood at full attention.

Hiding the small smile that threatened to crack his stern visage, Andreas spoke, "Recruit Cody, as part of your probationary contract you will be expected to fulfill all duties assigned to you just as if you

were a full member of the Buron Cavalry. You *will* do exactly as you are told by your immediate superiors and those they designate. You *will* perform to the standards of the Chief Tech Staedele or you *will not* be here when your probationary period is over with. You *will* report to Captain Johnson every morning to train with his infantry unit. You *must* perform to his standards if you wish to remain with the Cav after your probationary period ends. Am I understood?!"

"Yes Ser!" John Cody enunciated clearly.

"And finally, in regards to your family...", Andreas Staedele began to say, knowing that family was important. "You *will* send them a message telling them that you are on Antallos. You *will* tell them the *entire* truth of what you have done. I will have the Cav pay for the message to be sent seeing as how I *will* be sending along my own message regarding the situation. In this message I will explicitly tell your family that if they want you returned home then I *will* personally strap you into the first Dropship heading towards the FedSuns and the Capellan March. Is *that* understood?"

"Yes Ser!" the sixteen year-old answered clearly.

"Hale's from down that way, I think," Celic interjected. "Maybe part of the Crucis March nearby, I'm not sure. He may know a few of the jumpers and droppers that work down there."

"Check with him and find out," Andreas stated before turning to the table that was next to him.

Grabbing a few of the forms necessary the leader of the Buron Cavalry quickly scribbled several things down before turning and presenting them to the young man standing before him.

"John J. Cody, if you take and sign these forms you will be officially accepting the terms of the contract I have laid out before you and be recognized as legally binding," the Major remarked firmly as he fulfilled his official obligations regarding the offering of positions within the Buron Cavalry. "You will be subject to all rules and laws established by the Buron Cavalry and its employer. If you are found in violation of *any* of the terms laid out here in or of any rules or

laws that have been established and recognized, I and your immediate superiors will have the right to punish you as deemed fit or to decide to turn you over to our employer for proper legal proceedings as established under the rules and authority of the Mercenary Review Board and the GDI and CSN regulations regarding Private Military Contractors."

Cody nodded his head and reached for the papers. However, Andreas Staedele did not release them; he was not quite finished just yet.

"Furthermore, by accepting these papers you give me your word that you will not seek to deceive or act against the Buron Cavalry in any way or seek to tarnish its reputation by doing so to its employer," Andreas finished laying out the conditions necessitated by the rules that bound him and his unit. "Do you accept these conditions and terms as I have explained them to you and do you give me your word that you shall carry them out as I have described them to you?"

"Yes Ser," John Cody replied firmly. "Thank'ya Ser, I's won't lets ya'll down."

"Very well then, read through these, fill them *all* out *in full* with the *truth* and then sign them and return them to me," the CO of the Buron Cavalry stated as he indicated a cleared off table to the other side of the tent. "If you have any questions as you go through them you may ask me, Captain Nedeljko, or one of the GDI personnel present in this tent for clarification. After you have finished with those I will write up the necessary paperwork to have you transferred over to where the Cav's personnel are stationed near the *Distant Home* and have you get a properly outfitted kit from the GDI quartermaster's office."

"Yes Ser. Thank ya, Ser," the sixteen year-old recruit said as he accepted the papers before turning towards the table he had been pointed towards.

"Captain Nedeljko and I will be outside if you need us," Staedele remarked as he rose from his seat, 'Ned' giving him a dirty look over the fact that they had to go back outside and leave the confines of the air-conditioned tent. "C'mon 'Ned', marc is probably wondering what the hell is going on."

Stepping towards the door Celic spoke in a low-voice to his boss, "You know that this is either going to turn out to be the worst decision we've ever made or the best."

"Heh," Andreas stifled a short laugh before replying quietly. "Given all that has happened in the last year.... Who knows?"

Giving a shrug as he stepped out into the hot sun of Antallos the XO of the Buron Cavalry remarked, "Either way you're going to be getting earfuls later on and that means that I'm going to be getting earfuls too. Man, it never seemed this rough when someone else was in charge."

Stepping out of the tent behind his friend Andreas Staedele just shook his head. He wasn't too worried what the GDI and General Davis would have to say about this. No, what really worried him was what his wife Marie and his aunt Hanna were going to say. Shuddering as the worst came to mind the CO of the Buron Cavalry turned towards the canopy only to pull up short.

Shit...he had forgotten about what Marc would say about all of it.

Antallos Starport, GDI Military Section

Dropship *Distant Home*

Antallos, Periphery

January 5, 2007/3022

"And up ahead we have our very own home away from home," Celic 'Ned' Nedeljko noted as he, Andreas Staedele, Marc Johnson, and John J. Cody all got out of the Humvee. "The Buron Cavalry's own *Distant Home*."

Looking upon the massive form of the Union Class Dropship young John Cody gapped, asking, "So...what's its name?"

"*The Distant Home*," Celic replied with a wry grin, "Or weren't you paying attention to me kid?"

Face going from awed to worried in less than a millisecond, the newest recruit to the Buron Cavalry stuttered, "N...no Ser...I mean... Yes...Yes I's was listening...but I...."

"Don't sweat it kid," Captain Marc Johnson, head of the Cav's infantry stated as he clapped a mighty paw of a hand onto the youth's left shoulder. "Captain Nedeljko is just messing with you a little. 'Ned' finds that particular joke funny and likes to use it with everyone when they are first introduced to the Home."

"Ah," Cody uttered with a nod, shifting the weight of the beat up old rucksack he carried on his shoulder as he tightened his grip on the small crate he carried in his hands.

Walking slightly behind his three subordinates Andreas Staedele smiled slightly as Ned tried, in his own unique way, to officially welcome young John Cody to the Buron Cavalry. So far the kid was taking Celic's ribbing rather well, especially considering that Ned had been cracking jokes and making smart remarks ever since the four of them had left the training grounds gone to the ComStar compound to send a message to Cody's family and then stopped at the GDI Quartermaster to make sure the kid got outfitted with a proper kit. The boy had come to Antallos with little more than a small satchel of possessions and that would hardly be enough if he was to be expected to serve even his probationary term with the Cav. He had needed a two sets of coveralls, some shirts, a better pair of boots, some new skivvies, a few more pairs of socks, PT gear, some new hygiene supplies, a few....

"Uh boss?" Ned suddenly spoke, breaking Andreas's thoughts. "Trouble at twelve o'clock sharp."

Shifting his gaze to where his XO was advising Andreas felt his mouth suddenly go very dry as his eyes met two sets he knew very, very well. Standing at the top of the boarding ramp were Marie Staedele, Chief Tech for the Buron Cavalry and his wife, and Hanna Staedele, Captain of the *Distant Home* and his aunt. Though he and his party were still several yards from the bottom of the ramp Andreas immediately knew that both women were not happy just

from the way both were standing there, arms crossed in front of their chests with each having one of their feet tapping expectantly.

"Oh shit," the leader of the Cav whispered as he got to the bottom of the ramp and began ascending it.

"Captain Staedele, Chief Tech Staedele," Marc greeted both women in his usual reserved manner and getting a simple nod in return from each.

"Hanna, Marie...", Celic tried, a twitchy smile and nervous laugh in his voice. "Both of you ladies are looking rather lovely to-...."

"Shut it Ned." Marie Staedele stated authoritatively.

"Yes, Ma'am," the XO of the Cav responded quickly and without argument even though he technically outranked her.

"Andreas, dear *sweet* husband," Marie began, her voice laced with venom. "I've heard quite the little rumor running around recently... something to do with a new recruit for the Cav."

"Now Marie," the leader of the Burons tried to explain, "You know that I have command authority and the right to hire...."

"Oh you have *authority*," Hanna Staedele spoke, glaring directly at her nephew. "I recall your father having *authority*, but he still kept his Dropship Captain and Chief Tech in the loop and consulted with them regarding the hiring of new members."

"Yes, well," Andreas tried to counter, trying not to shrink under the harsh looks he was receiving. "This situation was a little...*different* and I...."

"*Different*," Marie Staedele stated, tilting her head and letting some of her dark curls fall from underneath the cap she wore. "Please, dear sweet husband...please tell us how this situation was...*different*."

"Yes nephew," Hanna nearly growled, "please, do tell."

"Um, before we get too far into this do you think we might be able to get in out of the heat a little? The sun is really starting to-...", "Ned" began only to stop immediately as two very annoyed females turned their glares upon him. "Or out here is fine."

Seeing his good friend shrink swiftly beneath the glares of the two Staedele women Andreas suddenly found it incredibly difficult to swallow as they turned to look back in his direction. Mentally curing himself for his sympathy getting the better of him when he decided to hire John Cody, Andreas Staedele tried his best to think of a way to explain the situation in a manner that would not be construed as being insulting to the intelligence of either of the two women standing in front of him. So far he was not coming up with a whole hell of a lot.

"Well you see it's kind of like this...", the Major started as he began to tell the story and hope that somewhere along the way his wife and aunt would decide that the truth was enough of a reason not to skin him alive.

Now as Andreas Staedele began to recount the tale, beginning with how he and the other two Buron officers had gone out to the training ground, the object of the tale, and consequently the subject of concern for the upper echelon of the Buron Cavalry, was not paying as much attention to the story as one would have expected him too. John J. Cody, brave, foolish, and all of sixteen years of age had currently found something else to occupy his interest. Truthfully it wasn't entirely his fault since it was standing right out there in the sunlight that entered into that massive Mech bay.

Framed almost perfectly by the sunlight was Small Laser 2 from Andreas Staedele's own Warhammer. Currently in several pieces the weapon was stationed in just the right spot, Marie Staedele having placed it there herself, to catch the sunlight and illuminate the many inner workings of the laser. Having grown up in a family that ran the largest salvage operation on Ridgebrook and coincidentally the second largest salvage firm in the Capellan March, John Cody couldn't help but be drawn to the weapon. Staring intently at the Small Laser, John Cody tilted his head to get a slightly better angle, completely ignoring the explanation his new boss was trying to give

his other new bosses.

"That there ain't right."

Right in the midst of getting to the part where he and Celic had finally started getting the truth out of Cody, Andreas stopped himself as he suddenly heard the young voice of his newest employee speak up. What was Cody thinking suddenly jumping in like that? The Major knew that his wife and aunt already knew the story he was telling...well maybe not all of the minute details but still.... Was the kid trying to get them in deeper than they already were?

"Hmm?" Marie Staedele hummed as she turned her grease stained face towards the young man who had interrupted her husband's attempt at explaining.

"It would appear that the boy has something to add to this conversation," Hanna Staedele stated coolly. "Perhaps Andreas hasn't been entirely forthcoming with...."

"Hey, I'm telling you the God's honest truth and....," the leader of the Burons began before clamming up as the two women turned their attention back towards him.

"So, you're him, eh?" Marie asked, as she turned her attention back to the kid. "Is there something you wish to add? Perhaps there is something that my husband has been less than *truthful* about, Hmm?"

Suddenly realizing that he was being talked to Cody responded slowly, "Huh? Oh...uh, no Ma'am. The Major is telling it just like it is. He and the Cap'n picked my story apart right quick. Saw through me faster than a phony C-bill."

"Really now?" the Chief Tech remarked, her mouth forming a small grin. "Then why is it you think there is something wrong with his tale?"

"Huh?" the young brown haired sixteen year-old responded before suddenly realizing he had spoken his earlier thought out loud. "Oh I's wasn't saying nothing 'bout the story Ma'am."

"Then what were you remarking upon young man?" Hanna asked, her voice nearly dripping with venom. "Something else that these three were doing while away from the ship today?"

"No Ma'am." Cody answered promptly. "I's was just saying how that there laser ain't right."

Looking over to the partially disassembled weapon Marie inquired further, "Oh, and what do you see that is the matter with it?"

"Well," the young man started nervously, not because he was being put on the spot but rather because he would be commenting upon someone else's work. "I's can see that just from here the power couplings are wrong. Also, somebody went and used the wrong power conduit. Weapon is probably reversing most of the power that tries to get fed into it and all."

Having been the primary tech for the Warhammer for the last decade or so and having stripped down and rebuilt that particular laser more times than she cared to remember, Marie Staedele asked in a stiflingly sweet voice, "Now what led you to form these...*opinions* young man?"

"Begging your pardon Ma'am," the sixteen year-old began, "but these ain't no opinions, they's facts. That there laser is an Achernar built ChisComp 32 Small Laser, but the power couplings and feed lines are for a Magna Mk. I Small Laser. Now the two look rather similar, I know, but they operate slightly differently with their power ratios. That laser ain't never going to work proper with those parts, no way no how."

"For your information, boy," the Chief Tech of the Cav stated rather harshly, "that laser is a Magna Mk. I Small Laser."

"I's hate to contradict you's like this and all Ma'am," Cody said, his voice remaining calm and clear except for his accent. "But that ain't no Magna built laser. It is an Achernar built ChisComp 32 Small Laser...probably got stripped out o' some ol' Enforce most like."

Andreas Staedele cringed as he heard John Cody contradict Marie. Contradicting his wife, the Chief Tech, was like...like.... Well it wasn't good that's for sure. Though he didn't dare turn to look towards Celic, Staedele knew his friend was probably also cringing at the thought of what exactly Marie might do to the kid.

"Come with me," Marie Staedele stated firmly as she grabbed Cody by his sweat-stained shirt and dragged him over to the partially disassembled weapon. "Now I want you to take a good, *long* look at this weapon and tell me again that it isn't what I said it was."

"I don't need to look long Ma'am," Cody responded as he reached for the tools next to the laser. "It can show you that it's right."

Cringing further at the thought that the kid was digging his own grave, and subsequently his and Ned's as well, Andreas bit his lower lip as he heard Celic quietly curse their luck for having finally run out. Stepping up next to the head of the Buron Cavalry, Hanna Staedele wore an indifferent façade on her face as she watched and waited. A few steps away Marc Johnson, seeming to be completely unperturbed by the entire course of events, simply folded his arms across his well muscled chest and waited. Watching his wife and his newest hire Andreas felt a cold shiver run up his spine as Cody apparently found what he was apparently looking for.

"See this here Ma'am," John Cody noted as he pulled a small plate from the underside of the laser. "You see here what the serial is? It reads AC32-7918457. If this was no ChisComp and a Magna like you said it was then it'd start with a MG prefix followed by a MkI and then numbers for the rest of the serial."

Taking the small plate in hand Marie disappeared into the shadowed corners of the Mech Bay. Andreas didn't need to be told where she was going as he already knew that his wife was going to check her tech and weapon manual. Well it wasn't really a proper manual, it was more like a conglomeration of weapon and tech designs and certain facts linked with each. The massive tome was a bundle of flimsies, copies, and snippets that Marie's father, the previous Chief Tech of the Cav, had begun putting together and which Marie continued to improve upon with ever little piece of info she

happened to learn. When his wife went for that book Andreas knew that the chances were incredibly good that she'd find exactly what she was looking for.

Waiting a few moments, trying his best to ignore the heat of the Antallos sun that beat down upon him, Andreas Staedele bit his lower lip as he saw his wife come walking back, her stony expression having remained the same. The man bit down even harder on his own flesh when he saw his wife bypass young John Cody and instead head straight towards him.

"Did you send a message to his family?" Marie Staedele suddenly asked.

Letting out the breath he hadn't even realized he had been holding, Andreas answered quickly, his voice spiking slightly at first, "Yes! I mean yes dear, I made certain he sent them a message explaining where he was and what the situation is. I sent along my own message explaining things."

"If they want him back we *are* sending him home," the Chief Tech ordered rather than stated.

"Of course dear," the leader of the Burons responded. "I said as much in my message to them, his family I mean. If they want him to come home I'll personally strap him into the first Dropship headed that way."

"He's going to need things, a full kit and the necessary tech wear," the dark haired woman once again ordered more than suggested.

"Already done," Celic chimed in suddenly. "We stopped at the quartermaster's and drew everything he needs and then-...."

Shooting the XO a merciless glare, causing Nedeljko to immediately be quiet again, Marie stated, "He's a tech...and a probationary member at that."

"Of course," the CO spoke quickly in order to confirm his wife's words. "He's only sixteen after all. We don't need the GDI or some

media hound thinking we use child soldiers."

Staring her husband straight in the eye, Marie Staedele spoke in a dangerous tone, "You, 'Ned', Hanna and I are going to have a serious talk later tonight regarding the hiring practices that you and 'Ned' used as well as whatever made you think that you can make such decisions without at least first consulting with either of the two of us."

"Yes dear," Andreas Staedele readily agreed, not wishing to have the wrath of the two Staedele women hanging over him for too long

"Very well," Marie decisively noted, "Cody, or perhaps we'll call you JJ since your name does happen to be John J. Cody...."

"JJ would be fine Ma'am," the sixteen year-old responded. "Mah Ma and mah sister Lizabeth, she's about a couple years older than me, that's what they's likes to call me."

"Splendid," the Chief Tech of the Buron Cavalry commented with a smile. "Well JJ, you can give your things to Ned, he'll run them over to the barracks that our single males are sharing with their peers in the GDI. I'm sure he'll be more than happy to make sure *everything* gets stowed away *properly* for you."

"Aw shucks, he don't need to do that Ma'am," JJ remarked, completely missing the tone and message that his new boss was trying to convey to XO.

"Oh but I insist, seeing as how you'll be busy here," the dark haired woman spoke as she walked back over to the partially disassembled laser. "I want you to rebuild this laser properly. You can do that, right?"

"Oh yes, of course Ma'am," the young man said, nodding his head of unkempt brown hair vigorously. "It's can have that put back right as rain in no time flat so long as I's got the right parts."

"Good," Marie commented before taking on a thoughtful pose, "Hmm, I don't think we have any parts for a ChisComp 32 anywhere.... Write

up a list of what you need and then give it to the Major. He'll wait here for it and then run over to one of the better salvage yards to get them for you. Hmm, on second thought you better go with him to make sure they are the right parts and will be suitable to our needs."

"Yes Ma'am," Cody replied calmly, not thinking that anything was amiss about the situation.

"Good, after you're done with that come see me," the woman stated as she shifted the tool belt that weighed heavily on her hips. "I can already think of a few other projects that need to be dealt with before we can call it a day."

Watching his wife beginning to turn back to her work Andreas Staedele, leader of the Buron Cavalry, let out a sigh of relief, though it didn't do much good as his aunt walked by just at that moment and whapped him in the back of the head with her hand.

"Don't forget the meeting later after all the work is done," Hanna Staedele spoke coolly, "And remember to bring 'Ned' with you as well."

"Yes Ma'am," the Staedele male answered quickly as he rubbed the back of his head slightly out of shame and slightly out of the fact that she had just swatted him.

"Oh joy," Celic spoke in a low tone, his arms already laden with John Cody's things. "Hopefully it won't be too-...."

"Oh and JJ!" Marie Staedele suddenly called out as she suddenly stopped walking and turned to look at the young man, at the same time sending a scathing look at her husband and his good friend. "Welcome to the Buron Cavalry. I hope that you'll enjoy your stay with us."

Dropship *Distant Home*
Antallos, Periphery
January 11, 2007/3022

Stretching his back muscles as he walked down the corridor leading to the *Distant Home's* Mech bay, Major Andreas Staedele fought to stay awake. It was close to 0100 hours and the *Distant Home* would be lifting off in the next seven hours in order to catch the Jumpship back to Earth. He should've been doing what the rest of the members of the Buron Cavalry were doing, getting some well deserved 'sack time' in their racks. However, despite feeling the strain of the day, having been making preparations for and discussing the return trip to Earth with his Aunt Hanna, who was the Captain of the *Distant Home*, there was one thing he needed to take care of still. When he had gone to the quarters he shared with his wife he found one major thing or rather person missing.

Passing through the doors that lead onto the upper gantry of the Mech Bay Andreas knew his wife would be here. It was process of elimination really. He had just spent the last five hours going over preparations with Hanna on the bridge before heading to his quarters. Marie had been in neither place and since she had not left any notice of having left the Dropship with one of the infantrymen that Marc posted as guards around the ship it was safe to assume she was somewhere in the Mech Bay.

Marie Staedele had a habit of working late, particularly on the day before the Buron Cavalry was scheduled to go anywhere. Marie, as Andreas had noted early in their relationship, was a perfectionist and always wanted to make sure everything had a place and that everything was in its place. Sure she would get greasy and grimy while working on the Mechs but that, at least according to her and Andreas knew better than to disagree, was something completely different.

Striding across the catwalk in the dimmed lights of the bay the leader of the Buron Cavalry spied the glint of a flashlight down near the leg of Christine Miller's Black Knight and heard the soft '*plink*' of tools. Coming to the nearest ladder the well muscled man made his way down, sliding on the rails once he was two-thirds of the way down and thus less likely to fall off and break his neck. Yeah, there would be something ironic. He had survived countless battles and even a nuclear holocaust only to die because he didn't take his time properly

descending a ladder. Ned would laugh himself to death if such a thing occurred.

Walking towards the 75-ton humanoid machine whose armor created the image of a medieval knight's helm Andreas Staedele knew that if his wife was by herself at this late an hour then she was probably just tinkering and not actually fixing something critical. Which was a good thing because despite the contract the Cav currently had and the salvage the GDI was pulling off Antallos there was not a good supply of parts for the near ancient Mech, being a rarity even amongst the armies of the Successor Lords. Hmm, he'd have to look into seeing if some of the heavy machinery manufacturers back on Earth could retool to start producing spare parts for the Cav. Maybe he could work a deal with the U.S. and the GDI to help share the costs of such a project. Oh well, it was something to at least consider for the future.

Staying quiet as he came up behind his wife, who was busy fiddling with some component or other inside the right ankle of the machine, Andreas felt himself grin like the teenager he had once been. Marie was bent over just so, giving him the perfect angle to admire one of her finest...assets. Hmm, when was the last time they had made love? Andreas knew that not being able to remember did not speak to how long it had been but rather just how tired he was, but still.... Perhaps it was time he and Marie started talking about making a new little brother or sister for Esther. After all, neither of them was getting any younger.

"Hey there beautiful," the leader of the Buron Cavalry spoke as he moved his hands onto the hips of his wife, smiling even more as she jumped in surprise.

"Gaaaaah!" Marie Staedele nearly screamed in surprise before turning and nearly 'beaning' her husband in the head with a wrench.

"Andreas! Give a girl a little warning next time. You nearly scared the life out of me."

"Oh I'm sorry young lady but you see," the well muscled 33 year-old said as he pulled her in close, "I'm looking for my wife as our quarters are so cold and lonely when she isn't around. Have you by chance

seen her? She's still as beautiful as the day I first spied on her when she was taking a shower."

Giggling slightly and giving her husband a playful little push the 37 year-old woman remarked, "Oh, was that back when you were just an awkward, pimple faced teenager who was trying to see the nice firm body of the Chief Tech's daughter, who just happened to be a few years older and far more mature than you were? Or was it back on that morning after our fifth date just before my father started knocking on the door demanding why I hadn't reported for my shift on time?"

"Both," Andreas stated as he and his wife shared a loving kiss there alone in the Mech Bay.

"Hmm, good answer," the grease covered woman stated as the two of them finally broke their kiss. "I've forgotten how good you are with that mouth of yours."

Smiling as he gazed into his wife's eyes the CO of the Buron Cavalry playfully remarked, "Then let me take you back to our quarters and refresh your memory further."

"But I've got work to do before we take off in a few hours," Marie protested half-heartedly as she stopped her husband's attempt to steal another kiss. "Christine was complaining about feeling some lag earlier and I want to...."

"It'll keep," Andreas remarked as he began pulling his wife away from her work. "Or if you like we can always start here an-...."

"Andreas!" Marie interrupted with a squeal and a short laugh more akin to that of a teenager than belonging to a woman who in a few years would be forty. "Stop, you're terrible."

"Oh? I don't recall you ever complaining about it back when we were trying to make Esther," the man stated with a wry grin. "In fact if I recall you used to *love* it when we snuck into my cockpit an-...."

"Um, Major...Chief...? Sir, Ma'am?"

Hearing the voice Major Andreas Staedele cringed and bit back the curses he wished to utter. All he had wanted to do was retire to his quarters, have some quality *personal* time with his wife, and then get a few good hours of rest before waking up and getting on their way back to Earth. Was that really too much to ask for? Stupid duties and responsibilities, always putting him in charge and....

"What do you need Berst?" Marie asked, recognizing the voice of the infantryman who was currently standing on the other side of the Mech Bay, the young man having politely not wandered over when he had heard the voices of the two people who basically kept the Cav going as well as signed his paychecks.

"Uh, um...well," the Berst replied a little unconfident as he suddenly picked up on the dark glare the major was shooting him as the couple came out from behind Mech cubicle three. "Well Ma'am I've got a few dossiers for the Major. One of the GDI clerks just ran them over saying that they wanted to make sure we got them before we left to go back home. I radioed the Bridge and they said that they couldn't get him on the horn in his quarters so Captain Staedele said that he had probably gone to the Mech bay and I should look for him here."

Marie Staedele giggled faintly as she heard her husband curse his aunt for inadvertently ruining his opportunity, poor Andreas...so close and yet ever so far. She'd make it up to him, maybe not tonight but then they were scheduled to have a nice long stay back on Earth. Hanna could take Esther for a night...or maybe a weekend.

"Alright, I'll take them off your hands," the Chief Tech of the Buron Cavalry stated as she moved away from her husband and walked over to the waiting infantryman.

"Ma'am," the young infantryman saluted as he handed over the dossiers before turning and saluting his leader. "Sir."

Returning the salute silently Andreas Staedele watched the man walk out of the Mech bay. Waiting a moment or two to make sure he was gone the leader of the Buron Cavalry walked over to his wife. It was time to get back to what was important.

"Andreas, you should take a look at these," Marie said as her husband tried to wrap his arms around her from behind.

"In the morning," the athletically toned man replied as he began to kiss his wife's neck.

"But they could be important," Marie stated as she tried not fall for her husband's ministrations.

"If it was important then they would've called me over to GDI HQ," the CO of the Cav returned, not wanting to ruin his night with paperwork.

"Andreas," Marie spoke with a tone full of warning.

Letting out a sigh as he knew his wife wouldn't let the matter go until he at least looked at the dossiers Andreas Staedele unwound his arms from his wife's torso. God, somebody in the GDI HQ was going to pay big if this was just some practical joke or regular paperwork that could've just been dropped onto the desk in the office next to his and his wife's quarters. Moving around from behind his wife he reached out and took the proffered manila envelope with a GDI seal on it.

"Well I better see if I can get that ankle joint fixed," Marie Staedele said as she turned to get back to work only to get stopped.

Grabbing his wife's arm Major Staedele quickly said, "Oh no you don't. I'm going to look at this and then *we're* heading up to our nice comfy quarters."

Looking at her husband and giving a playful smile, the dark haired woman responded, "That joint won't fix itself and I have other things to do on our trip back beside waist time with it."

"Then why waste time with it now? Have Chen or Dyer take care of it later," the slightly frustrated man stated. "Hell, have Cody take a look at it. I hired him on as a junior tech in order to deal with crap like that."

"I thought you hired him on because you felt sorry for him and could relate to him slightly," Marie remarked as she gave a wry grin to her husband. "And I thought you said you hired him specifically as a tech because it wouldn't cause problems back on earth with the folks who are already leery about having mercenaries about. I believe you said and I quote, 'They already hate us for something we didn't do. Why antagonize them and have them say we use child soldiers too', or perhaps I heard you wrong."

Sighing as his wife spoke the truth Andreas said, "Yeah, I guess I said that.... But still, I jumped through a lot of hoops with General Davis, Colonel Kurita, and Ambassador Smith when they found out that we had hired him on as a probationary member. I would think that you would have him in here working before we lift off in, oh...six hours and forty-two minutes."

"I would but he put in a full day today and I don't want to overwork him since he's still new and technically a kid," Marie Staedele, Chief Tech of the Buron Cavalry said. "We aren't bringing him with us back to Earth so I had him pulling a double shift today. I had him look at the PPC on the Black Knight since one of the capacitors keeps coming close to overloading even though it looks and tests perfectly fine. Then I had him look over the Flashman's left arm large laser as it keeps sending weird feedback back through the power couplings which is starting to fry them. Then he looked over the feed mechanism for the SRM launcher on your Warhammer before helping me test and run the safety checks on all of the reactors. Do you know how long it takes to make sure that the fusion rate is proper and that the neutrino signal being produced is not...."

Andreas let out a slight groan as his wife launched into her native tech speak or what he liked to call 'equipment geek' mode. He couldn't argue with her like this normally as he only had a basic understanding of most of the things she talked about. He also couldn't complain too loudly regarding John J. Cody, the Cav's newest recruit. The kid was making a name and a home amongst the Buron Cavalry and he had only been part of it now for just about 5 days. The kid was fun, friendly, and had a knack of saying just the right thing at times...well that is if you could understand him with his thick accent and all.

Since arriving upon that first day Cody had found a definite home with the Cav's techs. The boy had grown up in the salvage industry and was a veritable encyclopedia of knowledge regarding even the most obscure Mechs and their parts, at least when one could understand him past his long drawling accent. Chen and Marie fell in love with him for that knowledge and his seemingly magical fixing powers. Marc Johnson had also taken a shine to the boy as Cody, as promised, had shown up to every morning PT session that Marc ran with his infantry. The kid wasn't up to snuff on his basics regarding hand-to-hand or small weapons, but he was learning fast and Andreas could already see the gleam in Marc's eye over potentially adding a new infantry trooper who knew what to do because Marc had taught him it. At that Andreas had to sigh as Ned, Christine, and Tom Lemell, the Cav's other Mechwarrior, were now looking into seeing how well the kid could do outside of a simulator and in an actual Mech, though none of them were eager to let the kid drive one of theirs. Between all of them Andreas prayed that by the time the answer came from the message sent to Cody's family and his probationary period was over he wouldn't have a fist fight over where the kid should go and what he should be.

What the leader of the Buron Cavalry was most grateful for though was the fact that both his wife and aunt were finally no longer glaring at him over the hire. Oh, they were still glaring at Ned, but that was to be expected and probably would last until they all got back and touched down on Earth. That was just the way things were in the Cav. They were just one big, happy, slightly dysfunctional family at times.

Deciding he had heard enough of his wife's 'geek speak' the Major of the Burons interrupted her with, "Honey, I'm opening the folder now. Do you want to see what mediocrity is inside or would you like me to keep it to myself?"

Sticking her tongue out playfully at her husband, Marie Staedele gave playful whine, "Spoil-sport Mech-jock."

Rolling his eyes the man broke the sealed envelope and pulled out the folder inside. It was rather thin and only had a few papers in it

from the looks of it.

"It's from GDI intel," Marie noted as she pointed to the small letter code that identified the origin of the folder.

"It's probably just them sending along copies of the messages we received back from everyone who is coming back," Andreas states rather assuredly, knowing that a number of the old Burons who had left the unit before it had went out into the Periphery were on their way back and would probably be waiting for the Cav when the unit got back to Antallos. "Or it has something to do with those Manticore tanks we were looking at getting."

"Or it is them reminding us, especially you, Ned, and Marc, that we have to play nice with the Combine's diplomatic party if we should happen to be 'introduced' to them after they have arrived on Earth," Marie said, knowing that many of the members of the Burons, including herself, would never fully be able to reconcile with the Combine considering all of the battles that had been fought against the draconian nation. "You should still open it and see what it is."

"Yeah, yeah," the CO of the Cav noted, having already told most of the crew that they were to avoid the Combine party as much as they could if encountered. Damn Dracs, mark his words the CSN would regret trying to make friends with the 'Snakes' and it would be up to the GDI and Buron Cavalry to bail their asses out of the fire when one of the Dragon's servants decided that another glorious conquest was needed to prove the superiority of House Kurita over all of the other Successor Lords.

Seeing her husband's distraction Marie grabbed the folder out of his hands, eliciting a small 'Hey!' to escape him. Ignoring the half-hearted protest the chief Tech opened the file and began to skim its contents. Technically she shouldn't have been since it had been addressed specifically to her husband as the CO of the Buron Cavalry. But then again she was his wife and the Chief Tech of the unit. She was going to find out sooner or later what was in it, one way or the other.

"See boring stuff," Andreas said unconcerned not noticing the sudden look of concern that his wife had gotten as she read.

"Honey...."

"I told you we could leave it 'til morning," the major of the Cav stated, still not noticing his wife's concern as he his mind went to other things.

"Andy...."

Just wanting to leave what was probably the same old bureaucratic crap that he normally dealt with behind him the muscular 33 year-old continued, "Now let's get going and head up to our quarters and...."

"Andreas!" Marie exclaimed forcefully, finally gaining his attention. "You need to read this. Now."

Letting out a tired sigh and cursing whoever 'up there' was cock-blocking him like this, Andreas Staedele took the folder from his wife's grasp. Looking to the first page the man began to read, however, instead of finding what he had expected he found something completely different. Continuing to read the frown that had formed on his face began to deepen further.

"What are we going to do?" Marie quietly asked.

Gritting his teeth as he finished the basic summary Andreas Staedele felt the concerned touch of his wife's hand on his left shoulder. The folder contained a list of the security preliminary security checks that the GDI had been starting on the new and old personnel that the Burons had hired or were in the process of rehiring. So far GDI intel had cleared them all but were waiting to make final assessments once the personnel arrived on Antallos while the bulk of the Cav was away. Andreas wasn't concerned about that, he had already discussed it with Captain Swift the head of GDI Intelligence on Antallos and had turned over everything he had on his people who would be returning to the unit. No, what concerned him was the small notice regarding the fifth document in the folder.

Someone, in the course of starting the investigations into the new and

old members' backgrounds had decided to cross-reference the list of names that had been compiled from the numerous interviews and interrogations of the pirates who had survived the battle for Port Krin as well as those who were back on Earth having survived their ill-fated invasion. It had been only meant as a precautionary measure to make sure that none of the people Andreas was bringing in had any ties to known pirate bands. However, in the course of doing this, one name had gotten flagged. Back on Earth there apparently was a pirate who had once been part of the 'Black Lightning Raiders'. In the course of the interrogation this man had dropped the name of the 8th Syrtis Fusiliers Auxiliary and, of particular notice now, the name one Brevet-Lieutenant William T. Cody.

Looking to his wife Andreas shared with her a knowing look. On Earth there was currently a pirate who, before leaving Antallos, had seen the father of John J. Cody alive.

"As if life wasn't complicated enough already," the Mechwarrior spat as his wife rested a hand on his back.

Distant Home,
on approach to Earth, Solar System, Granville Cluster
16 January, 2007/3022

"Good morning! Good morning! Good morning!" the alarm cheerfully sang. With a growl, Andreas Staedele slowly woke up, set up in his small bed and, finally, hit the clock with a full force blow of his fist, shutting up the annoying voice that had ripped him out of his sleep.

"I hate transition." he murmured while changing, reminding him that he had got all of 3 hours of sleep this "night" because of the synchronisation of their ships internal clock to GMT + 1 standards. The message of a business meeting in Germany had reached them only two days ago, messing up the majors normal habit of gradually synching with the time on the planet they travelled to during approach. 'Well', he mused, 'at least we have gravity.' He hated zero g environments. He would rarely get decent sleep without gravity, a quirk he himself despised.

Seconds later, a banging on the bulkhead of his cabin ripped him out of these thoughts. "I'm coming, I'm coming." he shouted, slipping into his uniform. He walked over to the bulkhead, almost slipping in the process, opened it and stuck his head out, still looking halfway asleep.

"Good morning. You're looking horrible." his wife greeted him.

"Mornin'" he answered before kissing her on the cheek. "You look beautiful. Wha's up?"

"The briefing is in half an hour, everyone else is already awake, so I thought I'd make sure you wouldn't sleep in. I also got the final log on our new stuff." she said while holding a report in his face.

He yawned before responding, trying to sort out the confusing mess that his thoughts were at the moment. "Thanks. You can show it to me at the meeting. Right now, breakfast is more important. I won't even be able to think straight without some coffee."

Thirty minutes later

Entering the "wardroom", Staedele saw that everyone else was already seated and chatting around. He greeted them and sat down, a mug of coffee still in his hand, and looked around the table. His wife, the Mechwarriors of Iron Lance and Johnson were all present, waiting for him to open up the briefing.

"Well, as you all heard, I redirected us to land in Berlin, Germany. Sergei sent me a message just two days ago. Apparently, Heckler&Koch, the small arms producer we pegged for getting our caseless ammo, requested a meeting with us at the soonest possible time. We'll land in Germany in a about three hours, meet Sergei at the spaceport and then meet up with a couple of people H&K will send to escort us to their branch office in the city, where we will meet one of their officials. Sergei has been busy in the last few months, so I expect that the deal will be going well enough. Marc, Ned, you two are going to accompany me. We'll take one man of the infantry company with us, just in case we get complications. Apparently, there's still quite a few people on Motherload that don't like us. I'll leave choosing the man up to you, Marc, only one condition: He has to know German. The meeting will be held in English, but he can perhaps do us a favour by listening if they talk in German. Two people can hear more than one."

Johnson simply nodded at that.

"Now, because I'm not the heartless tyrant you all think I am," he waited for the laughter to die down, "everyone not going to the meeting will be taking off again and fly over to Ft Irwin and our families. And to curb your enthusiasm, you will be stuck unloading the gear while we'll be taking a comfortable commercial flight over to the US once we're done." he told them with a smile, earning some more laughs.

"What about the new guys?", Tom Lemell asked. "Why did we leave them and our new equipment on Antallos together with our two platoons?"

"Well," the Major responded, "that's because GDI Intelligence isn't

willing to let everyone in on the identity of Motherload quite yet. That's also the reason we had to leave that kid, Cody, over there."

Again, Staedele thanked the fact that his contract had a rather high ceiling when it came to the maximum of how strong he could rebuild his unit and still have the running costs paid by GDI. And he made a mental note to request a chat with the captive ex-*Black Lightning Raider* GDI Intelligence had informed him of.

"We're looking at some golden times ahead the way it looks right now. Hell, even Benny is coming back. And he's bringing all the other treadheads."

Staedele had managed to contact Benjamin "Benny" Tavrel, the former CO of the Cav's tank company, two months ago.

"I still can't believe the old scoundrel was still hanging around on Layover after so much time," Nedeljko mused.

"Well, Ned, it seems like Aaron Sandoval was honest when he promised to take care of our layoffs after Thestria. Apparently, he used some of his connections and since then Benny and Co have been working as a cadre for the tank units of the Layover militia and the Quicksell Companies local factory security. It was a long shot trying to contact him, but it paid off. Now he, his men and a lance of Manticores, *made by Quicksell* are on the way to Antallos. I guess Quicksell can forgive us depriving them of their cadre, given the sale they made in return. And before anyone makes any bad jokes, it's the same tanks Benny and his boys used for the last few months, so we don't have to worry about having to raid Quicksell for the missing parts.

GDI intelligence will, of course, go through their records with a fine comb, but I vouched for every single one of the guys, so I don't think it will take them *that* long. After that, they'll do garrison on Antallos and train with GDI, waiting for us to return.

Which means, we'll actually be more busy during the next months, what with recruiting our infantry up to two companies and recruiting the artillerymen as GDI greenlighted, but also training the newbies

and trying to find someone to upgrade our newly acquired artillery a bit.

So, next point: You told me you have done an analysis on the new Mechs, Marie..."

**Heckler&Koch Office,
Berlin, Germany
16 January, 2007/3022**

"... and with that, we can begin production of the caseless ammunition in about three months", the H&K official ended his summary, looking at the four people seated across the table. The negotiations had gone smooth, mostly because the civilian representative of the mercenary outfit, Sergei Filatov had already negotiated most of the deal even before the owner and commanding officer of the company had arrived back on-planet.

"Very impressive, Mr. Schneider. And given that it will by your estimate take at least another week to fully start producing compatible firearms, my unit would be too happy to test and buy this initial production run", major Staedele answered. "I think we have a deal."

"Thank you, Major.", Schneider replied. He steadied himself. 'And now the other chance' "Now, for your other enquiry, I think we have a system you could use to outfit your second company with, the XM8. We discontinued production after none of the militaries we intended to sell it to took the offer, but we produced enough of them to easily outfit a company of infantrymen. The specifications are exactly what you enquired for. Highly modifiable, reliable and lightweight. It uses a 5.56mm cartridge which, as far as we understand, is not only widely used here on Earth, but also in the Inner Sphere. And, as a bonus, it comes with an integral reflex sight."

"That sounds perfect. I assume we will be allowed to test it before making a decision?"

"Of course, Major."

"So, Mr. Schneider", Filatov asked, his old face betraying no more emotions than it did during earlier meetings, "how much are these additional rifles cost us?"

Schneider stated a number and smiled at the reactions of the people seated across his position.

"That's awfully cheap. No way that that is going to make you any profit" , Marc Johnson interrupted.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson. But we have produced the rifles in question already, which means some sales are still better than none. Additionally, your unit using the XM8 will be a perfect advertisement for both the system and our company at large."

"Well, there's nothing to lose in testing it out," major Staedele answered. "You have yourself a willing tester here."

For the next half hour, final agreements were hammered out before Major Staedele finally put his signature under the contract. And with one signature, the small arms related problems of the Buron cavalry were a thing of the past.

Before going, the Major had one last question.

"Mr. Schneider, your planned caseless assault rifle... it doesn't happen to be a direct copy of the TK Assault, does it?"

"Actually, major, we planned for it to be an almost 1:1 copy when it comes to the mechanism. At least the first model. Is there any problem with that? From what your statements and our evaluation said, the model seems to be a more than decent firearm." the man replied in a curious tone.

"Well, Mr. Schneider, the problem is that the TK is patented by Triesting-Kelang. They might just disapprove of someone selling copycats into the Inner Sphere. Just take it as a well-meant warning. Corporate competition inside the Inner Sphere can be rough. Very rough. And while TK is not exactly one of the biggest companies out there, it still is operating facilities on several dozen planets and has

considerable political clout inside the Lyran Commonwealth. You might want to not provoke them."

"Yeah", Johnson added, "last guys I heard from that breached a TK patent and simply ignored the lawsuits ended up with a merc company flattening their main production line. Pretty ugly affair."

"Well, let that be our problem, gentlemen. We will most likely never sell any of the first batch into the Sphere anyway", Schneider plainly replied.

**Star League Bunker
New Dallas
Former Terran Hegemony
October 2006/3021**

"So, Bob, Luke, any ideas on how to get inside?" Williams asked looking up at the looming portal. The massive, sliding doors were solidly shut, barring any entrance to the Star League facility within. And just to emphasize the fact, the doors were pockmarked and scored with craters and laser burns, testimony to its ability to resist the last bunch of looters.

Of course, those looters also had to deal with working auto-defense turrets. Six of them lined the front of the entrance. Five of them had been destroyed or disabled by enemy weapons fire. The sixth had been intact enough to keep taking pot shots at passers by for the past couple centuries before it had disabled itself just before it would have shot Williams. A portable fusion reactor with capacitors hid in the shadow of one of the turrets with open cabling snaking to all of them; apparently it had been running off and on for centuries, a testimony to Star League era engineering. But the whole set up looked horribly improvised to Williams.

"I dunno, Doc," Luke said, staring up at the same doors in awe. He shook his head. "We never found anything this big before."

"But we have found locked vaults sometimes," Bob added thoughtfully. "If this is like those, we ought to look for a panel with fancy buttons. We got real good with picking those."

"Well good luck with this one," Delacruz said disgustedly. She pointed at the door frame at about the location and height where an intercom or computer terminal might have been. In its place was a melted metal and plastic mess, victim of a long ago stray energy weapons blast.

"Yeah, that'd make things a might harder," Bob admitted.

"There's got to be a way inside," Williams said to no one in particular.

"It can't be too hard or the Sourcebooks would have mentioned something."

"The what?" Luke asked, curious.

"But, Doctor, you said it yourself, the info we had on New Dallas was very sketchy," Delacruz pointed out. "There were lots of things about New Dallas that weren't mentioned, like people still living here."

"You know what they're talking about?" Luke asked Bob.

"Not a clue, cuz," Bob replied.

"Still, it couldn't have been that hard," Williams said. He sighed. "I guess maybe the Sourcebooks aren't as magically all-knowing as I... as some people think they are."

"How about we blast our way in?" Delacruz suggested. "Tiffany's mech is carrying those bunker busters after all."

"I dunno," Williams replied thoughtfully. "The bunker could be rigged to blow if we try anything so crude, just like the one on Helm is supposed to be. What we really need is a cutting torch to make our own door in a door."

"Doctor," Delacruz began, giving the door a good thump. There wasn't even a hint of vibration. "This thing's pretty thick. I don't think we got a cutting torch powerful enough to cut through it. We certainly don't have enough propane."

"Too bad that ray gun's not working anymore," Luke added, pointing at the now quiescent turret. "I bet you could use it to cut a door."

"Actually, it still works," Williams said absently. "It's just programmed to not... Luke! You're a genius!"

"He is?" Bob scoffed.

"I am?" Luke said at the same time, bewildered.

"Yes!" Williams said, making his way over to the turret. "BT... Star League tech's pretty modular. We can disconnect the targeting computer and rig the laser to fire a low powered cutting beam instead of short high powered bursts."

"You sure that's possible, Doctor?" Delacruz asked.

"Possible?" Williams chortled as he pried open a panel on the turret's side. "I was on the team that did it back on Earth with pirate salvage. It'll be easy!"

Al'Isard New Dallas

"So, you're the man who started all this hullabaloo, eh?" a man said, catching Wayne's attention. The town meeting had broken up for lunch which had to Wayne's bemusement turned into a general party when people from neighboring towns had started arriving. This man was richly dressed for a local and the woman on his arm even more so. They also looked vaguely familiar for some reason.

"Colonel Donald Wayne, Global Defense Initiative," Wayne said, extending his hand. "And you, sir, are..."

"Nelson, *Boss* John Romero Nelson from Al'Pelleon," the man introduced himself. There was an undertone of suspicion and hostility in his voice and body language. But he took Wayne's hand and shook it firmly. He nodded at the woman on his arm. "My wife, Jean Anne."

"Now, J.R. Be nice," Nelson's wife chided to her husband. She shook Wayne's hand after her husband let it go. "Nice to meet you, Colonel. Don't mind my husband here if he's a bit of an ungrateful bastard."

"Jeannie!"

Wayne scrutinized them both. Now that he thought about it, they did bear a slight but marked resemblance to a younger Larry Hagman and Barbara Eden. No, he thought, let's not even go there. The universe was crazy enough as it was.

"...just don't see where they get off with the right to upsetting everything 'round here," J.R. was saying. "We had a good life, right? Outsiders from the sky are going to be nothing but trouble."

"It wasn't our intention to cause a social upset, Mister Nelson," Wayne told the man. "In truth, we'd really like to be friends. At the very least, we'd like nothing better than to avoid trouble."

"And how do we know that anything you say is the truth?" Nelson asked, still suspicious. "Hasn't our poor world suffered enough? It's cause we trusted outsiders like Kerensky," he spat on the ground, "to protect us that we wound up with the Rain of Fire. How do we know you're not more of the same?"

"In truth, you don't," Wayne admitted. "But trust is something that has to be built with time. It's something we have to earn. And if you don't mind me saying so, Mister Nelson, it's something we'd like to have the opportunity to earn if you only let us."

"Huh, well I'll be," Nelson said, surprised. "Honesty."

"Excuse me, sir?" Petronova said, appearing out of the crowd. "Doctor Williams is on the radio asking for you."

Star League Bunker New Dallas

"Where the hell did all these people come from?" Williams wondered aloud while watching the crowd filter into the bunker. When Wayne had arrived at the bunker, it looked like he had brought the whole population of New Dallas with him. Everyone was looking around and gawking like tourists.

Of course, there was plenty to gawk at. The first of many chambers was a literal parking lot, half filled with civilian vehicles belonging to the citizens of New Dallas. The other half was filled with ancient military vehicles and tanks, damaged from the fighting action of centuries ago. There were other chambers, also partially filled with vehicles and mechs and crates unopened since they came from the factory. The bunker's contents would have been the score of a

lifetime in the Inner Sphere. What it meant for the people of New Dallas – or the GDI for that matter – was simply incalculable.

"Doctor, is it safe to let them wander around?" Wayne asked as he watched people poking at things and drifting off into side chambers.

"Good luck trying to prevent them," snorted a finely dressed gent who was apparently following Wayne. Or at least he was dressed more richly than the crowd's average. "I may be a Boss, but even I know what I can and can't tell people to do."

"Nonsense, J. R.," another richly dressed man said. "You just got to know how to talk to people and project authority."

"Yeah?" J. R. replied. "Is that why all your people make fun of you, Tycho?"

"Actually, Colonel," Williams replied, ignoring the byplay. "It should be pretty safe. We haven't been able to sweep the place thoroughly of booby traps, but we're pretty sure there's no more automated gun turrets ready to shoot anyone who walks into their line of sight."

"Ooh, that sounds bad," J. R. said. He turned to the crowd and shouted. "NO ONE GO OFF ALONE! BUDDY RULES ARE IN EFFECT, PEOPLE!" That got a smattering of acknowledgements.

"So, Doctor," Wayne began, taking Williams aside. "Did you find it?"

"Find what?" Tycho asked sharply.

"Actually, yes we did," Williams answered. He gestured for them to follow. "Come on, I'll show you."

It was a fine procession that Williams led into the bunker's control room. In addition to Colonel Wayne, J.R, Tycho, and what seemed to be everyone even vaguely considered an authority figure on New Dallas had joined in to see what all the fuss was about. An open area at the front of the control room was filled with bodies laid out and covered with blankets. Over the corpses stood Bob and Luke, obviously trying to give last rites to the dead and making a hash of it.

"What..." someone began.

"These are the remains of command crew here," Williams explained. "It looks like they died at their stations."

"We should give them a proper burial," J.R. said solemnly.

"That we should," Tycho said a little less respectfully. His eyes flicked over to Wayne. "But you guys came here for something, something specific, and I don't think it's the dead."

"True, we did," Williams admitted. He walked over to what looked like a metal cabinet with a computer terminal built into it. The terminal was lit up and had a progress bar going. Next to the terminal were two neat stacks of cartridges. One pile had a note card labeled 'Empty'. The other, much smaller pile was labeled 'Done'. Williams placed a hand on the terminal. "This," he said in hushed tones of awe, "this is what we came for."

"Er, what is it?" Tycho asked, puzzled. "It don't look all that impressive."

"What is it?" Williams echoed. "It's..."

"Doctor..." Wayne said warningly.

"Colonel, they deserve to know," Williams argued. "And in a way, they need it as much as we do, if not more so."

Wayne glanced at the crowd of New Dallas leaders and came to a decision. He nodded to Williams.

"What this is," Williams said, patting the cabinet, "is possibly the most important thing on this planet and maybe even the entire Inner Sphere. We call it a 'Memory Core' and what makes it so valuable is that it contains knowledge."

"How is that valuable?" Tycho asked, annoyed. He didn't seem to understand, but here and there, some of the others showed dawning

comprehension.

"This holds everything the Star League knew," Williams said.

"Everything about fusion reactors, computers, space travel..."

"It contains everything you need to know on how to recreate civilization from scratch," Wayne broke in. "Mister Jefferson, you remember when you told me how your people needed to scavenge lostech because none of you knew how to build it all anymore?"

"I seem to recall something to that effect," Tycho admitted.

"Well what the Memory Core does is tell you how to build lostech," Wayne told him. "Not just one or two items. All of it. With the Memory Core, lostech need no longer be lost."

"That's... that's..." J. R. began, obviously searching for words.

"That's fantastic!" squealed the woman at J. R.'s side.

"That's hor...good, yes, good," Tycho said, seemingly less than enthused. "Obviously, such knowledge needs to be carefully considered and in the hands of experts..."

"No."

"Excuse me, Doctor," Tycho said, turning to the speaker. "What was that?"

"No," Williams repeated. "Knowledge is precious, but it does no good locked up and viewed only by a select few. For the Memory Core to do you people any good, it needs to be accessible where anyone and everyone can have access to it. Keeping it locked up does no one any good but the person holding the key. You want to really rebuild your civilization? Then let anyone who wants to know the contents of the Memory Core know it so that they can fully contribute to the rebuilding."

"But, Doctor, there's only the one Memory Core," J. R. pointed out.

"What, this?" Williams said, looking at the cabinet. "This is actually just a main frame for holding and reading the core. There's a whole room full of spare mainframes and portable readers just down the hall. But the contents of the core can all fit into one of these." He picked up a surprisingly light cartridge from the side table. Say what you would about bulky, inefficient BT processors, but their *data storage* technology – particularly the one in his hand - rivaled any commercial hard drive currently produced by Earth... and without moving parts to boot! "We're making copies as fast as we can. Think about it, every town can have a one."

"Wait a sec," Tycho said. "You're just giving this to us?"

"Why not?" Williams said with a shrug. "We've already made a few copies for ourselves."

"Free?" Tycho continued. Apparently he had trouble wrapping his mind around the concept.

"There there, Tycho," J.R. said, patting the other man on the shoulder. "I know the idea's a might hard for you, but I'm sure you'll get ahold of it." He turned to Wayne. "Still, Tycho does have a point even if he don't know it. What do you folks get out of this anyway?"

"Aside from the Memory Core?" Wayne said. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "My orders were to establish a base here to support operations here in the Inner Sphere. And things would be a lot easier for me if we were friends with you and could trade for necessities like food. And now that I think about it, you being able to make and sell any parts we need would be a tremendous boost."

"Sell?" Tycho said suddenly, perking up. "Did someone say 'sell'?"

"Of course, the Memory Core isn't much use if you don't know the basics of what it's talking about," Williams mused aloud. He turned to Wayne. "So, Colonel, how do you feel about opening a university?"

Freedom Station Promenade
January 3rd 2007/3022
Earth, Grantville Cluster

"I still can't believe it," Mara said, watching the planet below. Wreathed in clouds, flickering storm patterns, and the reflected light of early morning, Terra was as beautiful as ever. But this wasn't the Terra she had grown up on. This was something so very strange and new. "Earth."

"We have to thank you for your assistance, Miss Cameron- I assure you that we need it," a voice said evenly. Linda turned, surprised at the intrusion.

The man was young, handsome, and wore the uniform of GDI's space navy- green and blue lines melding together to cut a striking figure. Russet hair framed a noble face, and green eyes glanced at her appraisingly.

"Michael Cameron- I've been assigned as your guide," he said smoothly. "You've been approved to go planetside- finally, and the powers that be must have thought it amusing to assign myself to you."

"You're a relation?" she asked, guardedly. The name was the same- but even in the heyday of the Star League there had been many who bore the name Cameron but not the lineage of that auspicious family.

"By my reckoning, you're my great- a dozen times or so removed- niece," Michael answered truthfully. He pursed his lips before continuing. "According to the sourcebooks, there's a direct Cameron ancestor of your family- one Jessica Cameron."

"The name's familiar- although I don't believe we've had a Jessica in the family in many years," Marasaid, considering. "Of course, the family records were on Terra, and..."

"Well, I can confidently say that given what we've come to

understand about what was formerly fiction, and is now reality, my sister is most assuredly your great grandmother, albeit several times a more distant one," Michael continued. He frowned, then straightened. "We were lucky she was in the books- they say she died in a car accident in 2012. I don't intend to let that happen this time around."

"What about John?" Mara asked, changing the subject. All this talk about futures and pasts and the strange circumstances that Earth had arrived here was making her feel quite odd. It was not a feeling she enjoyed. "When can I see him? For that matter- when can I see the others?"

Mara referred to the other survivors brought back from Columbus. They were all that remained of the Star League she had known- and Linda felt an obligation stronger than duty to ensure their welfare.

"You'll be happy to know that they've all finished their debriefing and are already planetside," Michael explained. He held up a hand to forestall further questions. "I would caution you, however, that there will be many questions. Outside of your debrief, there is much we do not yet know about your technology base, and because your people are the only real experts we have on the matter, there will be, well..."

"Eggheads on hand to pick our brains?" She finished.

"Exactly," Michael concluded. Then he smiled that wry smile again and turned to leave. "Our ride departs in half an hour. Your things have already been stowed- so I suggest you say your goodbyes. The station crew doesn't rotate out for another three weeks."

Mara nodded, and made to leave, when a pointed dart-like object made of paper sailed towards her. She snatched it out of the air, and unfolded it. It was a letter- written with a date and time, and a location- but the data was unfamiliar.

"Mother decided to invite you to Easter dinner- it's an esoteric tradition, but tradition is what makes us a family," Michael elaborated. "You don't have to come, but I'd suggest you do."

"We'll see- *after* I'm planetside," Mara replied. Then she turned away from her supposed 'Uncle' and departed. This 'Michael', an apparent relation despite the centuries of difference, was an interesting speaker. Not entirely suave, he nevertheless was possessed of a smug self-confidence that he carried wrapped around himself like a cloak. Making her way 'down' a ladder to the earthside section of Freedom Station, Mara turned her thoughts back to those under her protection. How were *they* handling this transition? Mara didn't want to spend the rest of her life as a library for these people- promise or no promise.

As she made her way towards the docking ring, she spotted a familiar figure, who turned and smiled at her.

"Hey Mara!" called Shirase Tendo, formerly of the GDI Expedition FS. He smiled broadly.

Perhaps the eccentric technician could bring her up to speed, Linda considered. If anything, his poor grasp on the english language was apt to make her laugh.

She smiled and took his hand in hers.

"I'm glad to see you, Tendo-san," she said warmly. Tendo loosed a salvo of a smile at her use of the honourific. "It's good to be going home."

"Me too," Tendou confided. "Too stuffy up here."

Washington, DC
January 5th, 2007/3022
Earth, Grantville Cluster

For Richard Sanford, the return to Earth had been the end of a long, arduous mission, and the beginning of another. Apparently World Government had sprung up in his absence. Apparently GDI had been ratified. Apparently Phantom Snowflake had been written off the books as a failure. It was amazing what missing a deadline by a month could do- and more amazing how much paperwork a

triumphant return would produce.

"Still at it, sir?" the warm voice of Norris Algaute asked. The young woman had cleaned up remarkably since their return home- the depression she had been fighting with seemed to have finally departed, and Norris had reaffirmed her intent to stay with the now ratified Global Defense Initiative. That, of course, meant being assigned to the Columbus Aftermath project for the foreseeable future- GDI had seen fit to assign those whom had taken part in the retrieval and stripping of the Colmumbus Facility to the operation that would put it all back together.

Officially, it they were on paid leave. They did not have to follow military schedules, or observe military protocols- although many did out of tradition. But they still had to work- even if it was much less work then they had done on their previous tour of duty.

Part of the assignment was familiarity- the scientists, displaced from the long gone Star League, were civilians. GDI had tried, precisely once, to swap out the expedition forces with new personnel- but the civilians had not reacted well. Without Linda Cameron to guide them, or those friends they had made with their rescuers, they had clammed up and shut down. One man even had a psychotic break- only stopped through the presence of one of the 'pets' the team had brought back- those curious cats they had discovered in stasis. While Richard had initially held the idea of bringing the collection of felines that his team had 'adopted' back to Earth to be rather silly, he had to admit that their presence had done much to calm the more emotionally unstable of the civilians.

"Still?" Richard paused, then sorted some more paperwork. "Oh lord, it's the morning- you're just up."

"Yes sir." Norris replied. "0600 hours, sir."

"Well then, I suppose I should get some sleep," he said groggily. "Captain's prerogative."

"If you say so, sir," Norris replied. Richard narrowed his eyes. She was almost... bouncing.

"Did you want something, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Yes sir- I just wanted to tell you that Customs has authorized our two Knights to head planetside- they'll be here tomorrow," Norris explained- still excited, still shining like a lightbulb. "But that's only-

"The other cats- I got the memo," Richard interjected. Any more bouncy happy perky talk and his headache threatened to increase tenfold.

"No sir. Or rather, not exactly, sir. The kittens are coming. The lottery came up with your name, so you get first pick," she exclaimed.

"Personally, I wanted the red one, but Moonsilver isn't ready to part with them yet, and as I mentioned- there was the lottery, sir."

"The lottery?" Richard deadpanned. Internally, he winced at the names that the Refugees had assigned the cats. All fanciful and heroic. 'Moonsilver'. Pfft.

"Yes sir."

"Who entered my name?"

"Oh, I couldn't begin to guess who would take such a risk, sir," Norris replied enthusiastically.

"Was it Blake?" he asked evenly. Norris just smiled that blinding smile.

"Goodbye sir- make sure to come see the kittens in the afternoon, sir," Norris finished. Richard blinked and she was gone. The clock read five minutes later, and it was then that Richard decided that maybe it really was time to hit the sack. Taking one last look at the droves of paperwork, he sighed, then headed for his quarters.

Sleep came quickly, and Richard dreamed of cats, Columbus, and an insistent voice calling his name.

Abruptly the dream seemed to jerk- and there was a familiar looking

cat...

It was, of course, Patch. Richard wasn't entirely sure why the cat kept showing up in his dreams- dream logic wasn't his strong point, and while he had been having such dreams since the addition of the small contingent of cats that the expedition had 'adopted', he rarely remembered any.

Tonight's dream involved coffee at Starbucks. Richard took his dark, while Patch took his with a bit of milk. They discussed the weather, GDI's plans for the material retrieved from Columbus, and even compared notes about who was driving the jaguar with tinted windows that sat parked outside on the street corner.

Then Patch paused for a moment, and said a most curious thing.

"You have to go, I think. You've got an important meeting."

"I have not," Richard replied, although dream logic being what it was, he was unsure if this was actually the case.

"You do. You need to get up," Patch replied.

"I need to..." and then Richard paused, and in his pause he paused again. Opening his eyes, he saw his room around him. He was awake. "I have an important meeting?"

He considered the fading remnants of the dream, curious about what it could mean. Throwing on his casual wear and giving his hair a brief comb over, he stepped into the hall- and was abruptly knocked to the floor as the bolting form of Comstar Precursor Gabriel Ormus smashed into him. The two tangled, and while Richard was still groggy from sleep, he was aware enough to grapple properly, forcing the Comstar man into a headlock.

"The hell do you think you're doing?" he growled. Gabriel merely looked at him with eyes too wide. He started to say something, and then stopped, and started shaking in some sort of episode.

Abruptly four security men arrived around the corner. Richard gave

them a half hearted salute as he attempted to haul the Precentor to his feet.

"He ran sir- bolted in the middle of his lunch meal. This isn't a prison- we had five men on him, but he knocked out two and-" one of the men elaborated.

"What's in this direction?" Richard asked, gesturing down the hall that Gabriel had been running.

"Access to the grounds, storage, the infirmary-"

"The Infirmary. Get his legs, we need to get this man a doctor!" Richard growled. Gabriel merely shook in place, eyes shut in pain.

As the security men helped Richard carry the Precentor to the infirmary, Richard's mind wandered, and he considered the reaction the Precentor was having. Who would want to poison him, and more importantly, who would risk actually doing so?

Port Krin
Antallos
December 11, 2006/3021

A series of titanic explosions sounded in the background as an ammunition bunker succumbed to a stray PPC shot, as the Major's voice snarled in Vbranch's ear on the company command circuit "No debate dammit, if we continue in to try to help the rest of the regiment we're dead. Alpha Battalion's already gone, and Bravo's fading fast. Head for the dropships at maximum speed.

As Captain Vbranch relayed the order and set her Warhammer into motion, the bizarre six legged mechs continued to tear apart the city and its defenders. Sergeant Mullen rapidly pulled ahead of the main body in his Jenner, and only had time to say "Contact, oh shi-" before a single energy blast from an impossible distance tore straight through the center of his mech.

Dansel cursed inwardly as the headlong flight of his battalion faltered, *of course* the enemy would be in position to cut off their escape with previously undetected forces. His first instinct was to order a charge, but it could be said with some fairness that his first instinct was *always* to charge. Over the private command circuit, he said "Hale?", somehow infusing the one word with all of the meaning that would normally be contained in the phrase 'Holy crap we're screwed, please tell me you've figured a way out of this becuae you're so much better than me at this sort of thing'.

Captain Burgess Hale, XO of the GDI Foreign Legion began crisply issuing orders as the enemy proved that even its ridiculous equipment had limits by repeatedly missing as they closed the distance: "Unit to maintain sixty kph advance towards enemy, all mechs to maintain evasive manueveuring until 1600 meter distance is reached. Targeting assignments to follow."

As he put his mech into a one-handed zigzagging run while typing out targeting assigments and contingencies, the Major's voice came on the unit circuit, "Hale is to be kept intact at all costs".

Gee, thanks boss the designated protectee thought as he continued assigning secondary and tertiary targets and unit groupings. Meanwhile, the fifteen enemy machines continued to scuttle forward, their increasingly accurate fire stymied for the moment by the speed and frantic dodging of Charlie battalion's mechwarriors.

Sergeant Samson's Enforcer was the first mech to fall, just as the battalion began to cross into the range where its longest ranged units might hope to return fire at all effectively. The remaining five kilometers to the ordered engagement range passed with aching slowness, two minutes stretching out into an eternity as mech after mech was sent crashing to the ground or entirely obliterated, and the four Battlemasters in the lead took hit after hit to their armor.

When the order to fire was given, only thirty battlemechs remained on their feet. Lashing out as one, they vented their fury on a mere five targets. *Shitpissfuckgodamnit* Dansel raged internally as he saw three lasers and a PPC scour armor from the bulbous pod atop the target of his command lance without removing it. A second volley transformed it into a burning wreck, but by that time another nine of his people were gone, and his reactor was starting to go critical. *Oh well, I did say at all costs.* He thought resignedly, watching one of the remaining insectile bastards rush well ahead of the others and draw a bead on Hale's mech. Allowing the next volley to spin his Battlemaster, he turned the movement into a lunge, grabbing the offending machine with his one remaining arm a bare moment before a globe of silver fire consumed them both.

Twenty to nine now, the fight continued to rage as the remaining Legion mechs retargeted on only three of the invaders. Two of those targeted fell, but in exchange they claimed eight more GDI mechs. "Vranch, you have comma-" was all Hale was able to utter before a stuttering arc of plasma neatly decapitated his mech. At the same time, three more battlemechs exploded, just as the third targeted monstrosity finally crashed to the ground.

"All units engage Sierra Five" The last eight GDI mechs on the planet followed Captain Justine Vranch's command, but were unable to breach its impossibly thick armor as it shattered the legs of Von Braun's Awesome at point-blank range, contemptuously continuing to

stride over its recumbent form.

Bellowing "Friss Scheiße!" over his loudspeakers, Von Braun jammed his arm mounted PPC into its thorax as he fired. Explosions cascaded throughout as it collapsed, crushing the assault mech beneath it.

Proving that they were slow learners, whatever their technical wizardry, one of the five attackers remaining continued its forward movement towards Burdoch's fallen Crusader "Birdy?" Vbranch asked.

"Do it." Firing all of her remaining weapons, she cored through the Crusader's tattered armor to its ammunition. The resulting explosion sent the legless body of the alien mech tumbling. Vbranch had no time to dwell on what she had just done, as a massive light filled her cockpit.

A hissing noise sounded as the simulator cracked open. Blinking in an attempt to clear her vision, Justine Vbranch stepped out into the bay full of simulator pods. A voice spoke behind her "The Major said to

tell you 'not bad'." Turning, she found Hale behind her, offering a water bottle and a towel.

"I wouldn't put it that way sir." Her first real chance to impress the old man with her ability to command independently, and all she'd done was get everyone killed. Well, almost everyone, Brox and Jankowski's simulators were still closed, indicating that their mechs were somehow still active.

"Trust me, the reason he's not here is because he's making his opinion known to the graders as we speak" Hale said, gesturing at the closing door to the control area.

"That was complete Bullshi-!" resonated throughout the bay, cut off as the door hissed to a close.

"Meanwhile, we haven't technically lost yet, since the Demonic Duo are still at it." Immediately after Hale spoke those words a groan resounded from the assembled members of the battalion. "Well, Brox is still at it anyway" he said as a fuming Jankowski emerged.

In one of those bizarre twists of human events, GDI had come into possession of just over a full battalion of functional simulators, some the personal property of Vorax, a few belonging to the Krin militia, several more from the mercenary battalion Vorax had snuck on world, and more than two dozen that Ryan had been hauling as booty. Since the Foreign Legion was low on the priority list for mech repair, Dansel had managed to finagle extended simulator time. The asskicking they'd just received was by no means the first, although it was certainly the most completely one-sided to date.

Another groan rose from the unit watching the monitors as Brox finally got boxed in and had his left leg sheared off at the knee. Defiantly, the Battlemaster on the screen raised its remaining arm with middle finger extended, then immediately jammed it into the glowing barrel being leveled at its head. The resulting detonation ripped the weapon and mount from the spider-bot's body, and tore the badly damaged Battlemaster in half.

The assembled field grade officers looked up from Major Lewis collecting his winnings to see Dansel bracing to attention. "My apologies gentlemen, I felt the need to take the side of my unit for the sake of my public persona and maintaining their support".

General Davis smiled understandingly as he replied "Forgiven Major. Your thoughts on this exercise?" In his personal opinion Dansel had nothing to worry about after the way he'd quelled the near riot some idiot of a new arrival had started by spreading rumors about taking away the Legion's mechs, but he certainly understood the need to play it safe.

"We had no warning, the rest of the simulated regiment completely refused to respond to any attempts at communication or coordination, all of the support the mechs should have had was nowhere to be found, and if I'm not mistaken that was a cosmetically modified front line 'Charlie' unit that just handed us our asses by popping up directly on our exit path. All in all as close to a textbook no-win scenario as I can imagine. When can my boys try it again?"

Davis made a show of studying the simulator schedule on the far wall and the Charlie battalion training schedule on his computer. "Ten days from now Major, and your battalion will have to give up an off-duty day to do it. Are you sure you want to inconvenience them for this?" As in nearly all things this was a test, the file on Dansel included the years-old NCOER detailing his tendency to coast if allowed to get away with it. The other two battalion commanders had been nearly as irate in actuality as their junior counterpart had made a show of being and already had their second run scheduled.

"Sir, I don't even think I remember what those words are supposed to mean to me personally, so they can suck it up."

"Then ten days it is. I'll have copies of the other battalions runs delivered to you so they don't have an unfair advantage. Dismissed

Major" After Dansel had left, and the door closed, he turned to his officers. "Fifty on twenty-six kills for their next try."

Spotting the old man emerging from the control center, Burdoch shouted "Battalion, attention!"

"As you were, now gather round. Since we didn't manage to get it right, we get to try again in ten days time." As everyone present did the math, a groan started to build from the sub-audible. "At ease, if I wanted to hear moaning I'd have Brox take you on a run. Report to the briefing room in two hours for the After Action Review, and say farewell to your bunks, because you won't be seeing much of them for a while. Group, attention! Fall out! Hale, walk with me for a minute"

"Hard on them much?" Hale asked rhetorically as they made their way towards the officer's mess.

"It's the only way I know to express my love" was the deadpan reply. "If I let them know I care, then they'll be wanting hugs and bedtime stories. Aren't you supposed to be calling me 'sir' for their benefit anyway?" he asked?

"They can't hear us, and I thought you'd want to hear the latest bit of ass-kissing apology anyway. Apparently the AFFS has decided that I was on detached covert duty all these years, and my promotion to major was back-dated to a year and a half ago."

"Well congratulations, major, sir. How many oblique hints that they'd like you to come in for debriefing this time?"

"Just the one, I think they're starting to get the idea that I'm done with them. Besides, I'm still worried that Lewis managed to get a bomb implanted in me back on the 'Lode. The money's useful, and the holo of the bastard's execution was something to treasure, but what bridges they didn't burn I torched on the way out. Now that I have money, the thing to do would be to try to pull together a ramshackle mercenary unit, overextend myself, and go on the run from my

debtors within the year. Of course, you managed to do that on GDI's dime, so I can watch the fireworks without going bankrupt."

"Yeah, about that whole being a multi-something whatever millionaire thing..." Dandel trailed off.

"What critically essential material did GDI forget this time?" After Dandel explained at length, Hale nodded. "Agreed. But I get to be there when you present the general with the bill, and I also get to refer to you as 'Bitch where's my money?' in private for the next week."

"When the hell did Johnson ever talk to you about that, and why would he have let that slip anyway?"

"From Lewis by way of Flake actually, it's just too damned funny not to share."

"And now I know why Johnson volunteered for that secret squirrel mission to parts unknown."

Port Krin
Antallos
December 22 2006/3021

Hale pointed at the screen "Look, right there" As the warrant officer rewound and resumed play in slow motion he continued "Those bastards were moving to respond to my commands before *our* people were." The results of that exercise still stung, they'd short-circuited start up as much as they'd dared, and moved in at blatantly unsafe speeds to hit the enemy while the other battalions were still at least drawing fire. They'd overrun the first group without problem, and expended the remnants of the notional Alpha Battalion to buy enough time to bring down the second, but the third had anticipated their positions inside the city and won the ensuing slugfest instead of walking into the planned ambush.

Warrant Officer Flake leaned back in his chair "Yup, I'd say it looks like they included a fairly hefty recognition program in the response algorithm to keep you from pulling anything sneaky."

"You don't seem even slightly surprised." Dandel said from over his other shoulder.

"Well, unfortunately, I really can't talk about any specifics. Hypothetically though, the guy in charge of simulation programming might be the kind of person who leans on others with the necessary skills when the lazy bastard is feeling overworked. And hypothetically, he might have had them handle the superb, incredibly accurate and detailed terrain modeling and physics interactions and also the communications monitoring software. It's possible, if something like that was going to happen, that said nameless individual might have tied them in to a worthless kludge of a tactical program practically lifted straight from a real time strategy game. But if something like that was going to happen, he'd probably at least have the sense to order the silence of his uncredited partners, so they wouldn't be able to provide details to an old friend and former roommate." The warrant officer stared pointedly at the ceiling as he finished this monologue.

"You know, I'd thought that those secondary explosions were entirely too vivid. Why the hell did you become a stevedore anyway?"

"Same reason you did, numbnuts, sir. Shortest school, biggest bonus, largest college incentive. And last year re-classing was just impossible, I was barely able to get into warrant officer's school, so I'm stuck managing our cargo operations for all of an hour a day except for once a week when the dropships come in."

"So I take it that you need Team Bruce to sneak you out unnoticed?"

"Already made the arrangements. Project Voyeur is nearly done by the way, and Project Dynamic needs another infusion from the walking ATM before it stalls in about a week" he said, gesturing at Hale. "Take care, you bug-fuck crazy bastard."

"So, bitch where's my money, where do we go from here?"

"First, I bang my head on the wall a few hundred times for ever agreeing to that. Then we track down Laisa and whoever she points us to, take copious notes on innocuous subjects, and head back to the barracks. Then I figure out who we need to get to help us craft a battle language and then teach it to forty people in less than two weeks. After that, we can seriously get to work."

"Von Braun. Working on a masters in linguistics of all things".

"You know, if you're going to get to know my unit better than I do, you could at least have the decency to make a flow chart."

Office of 'Major' Tony Dandel
Port Krin, Antallos
December 29 2006/3021

Dandel looked up as the two entered his office, irritably returning their salutes as they reported. They *knew* he hated going through the Mickey Mouse bullshit with anyone who had been next to him as they held the line, which meant that they took pains to be as thoroughly correct as possible in their dealings with him as a means of getting his goat. "Take a seat. Since your situations are both fairly similar, I decided to combine both interviews to keep from repeating myself. Captain Brand, you specifically requested the official disbandment of the Fire Brands, and for your remaining personnel to be folded into the Foreign Legion, is that correct?"

"Yes sir. The support GDI has provided was far and above the bounds of the already generous contract, and while my unit could still reconstitute into a fighting force because of that support, if we left the employment of GDI at any point in the future there would be no chance of receiving equivalent support from any other faction. It seemed simpler to officially transfer to the ranks of GDI, and to let

GDI enter into a long-term lease option on our machines in order to better take care of my people in the long-term." There were other reasons, but The Hulk was known for being notably irate with anyone he considered a whiner, and it was difficult to tell exactly what might cross that line with him some times.

"And the reason that you carefully aren't mentioning is that the new arrivals, despite a great deal of pressure from other survivors of the battle, are quietly making your lives and those of your people hell. Lieutenant Fischer, that same reason applies to you, but you have no wish to officially disband the Freelancers at this time, correct?"

"Yes sir."

"In addition, Captain you have run into a wall with regards to potential advancement in the regulars, since despite your efforts working up your ad hoc company, you've been passed over as Major Staedale's replacement as commander of Bravo Battalion, and if the rumor mill is to be believed, the provisional battalions they're forming on paper to be filled out with additional recovered equipment. So, Captain Brand, I have a job offer for you. The hours are shitty, and you'll be stuck trying to bring rank newbies up to a bare minimum of incompetence. Much of the time you'll lose your most promising people for reasons beyond your control, and just when you get them to the point they seem to be worth your breath to insult, they're going to be taken away from you and a fresh batch of dismal prospects will be dropped in your lap. Interested?"

Captain Brand suppressed a wince at the prospect of yet another test while stuck as a captain, but replied "Yes sir."

"Outstanding. Lieutenant Fischer, I have two offers for you. First, Brevet-Major Brand here is going to need competent company commanders to help him manage his load, if he doesn't decide he needs you as an XO more. Second, I'm going to need someone well-versed in small unit mech tactics to manage my command group, and I can't afford to break up any of my existing lances at this time. The second option doesn't come with even an ersatz promotion at this point I'm afraid."

"The second option sir." Inwardly, Natalie breathed a sigh of relief, Brox was her only real anchor on this planet (she ruthlessly suppressed the image of Greene's irrepressible grin appearing in her mind unbidden), and he'd been slowly drifting away from her.

"Fantastic. Brand, get with Hale about our training standards and the atrocity of force structure you're going to be saddled with in a little less than a month. Fischer stay one more moment please." Waiting a moment for Brand to exit the room, he then continued. "Lieutenant, I want you to consider where you want to be in ten or twenty years time. You've seen from what happened on Motherlode, and how a single unforeseeable disaster can result in a mercenary force being eradicated, and that without even factoring in the possibility of active betrayal by your employers. Don't stick to a path which holds no prospect of a real future just because it seemed like the only way to even have a chance of safety in the past. Whatever you decide, at least have a talk with Hale about finances. Dismissed."

Control Room
Port Krin
Antallos
January 5, 2007/3022

"So do you have anything new to throw at them today Captain?" After a total of eight different runthroughs each with the same result, most of the other officers felt they could no longer make the time to watch a foregone conclusion. Still, the least Colonel Aladdin Al Azim could do was watch their efforts in person. In addition, as the neutral party holding the bets, he was needed to make an accurate account to avoid disputes.

"Added a fifth grouping that will come in from just out of sensor range when I hit the button sir. Since none of them have done more than scratch the fourth yet, that should stop them cold."

"I see." the Colonel replied, carefully hiding his distaste. While his true ire might be reserved for the Draconis Combine, the ham-handed brute force approach of the Lyran Commonwealth held no appeal for him either, and this was entirely too reminiscent of their, for want of a better word, tactics.

"Well they've started. Wow, shaved a good thirty seconds off their previous start-up, and damn, but they're cranking out the communications. I guess Hale think micro-managing might do the trick this time." Glancing between the various screens, Captain Baker zoomed in on Alpha Battalion as they began to engage. His eyes widened as the first invader fell long before Charlie Battalion came in range "Huh that hasn't happened before. Wonder why it stepped out... now that isn't right." he said as Bravo Battalion also made an unassisted kill. The two computer run battalions were still losing four mechs for every kill they made, but the point was that they shouldn't have been making kills in the first place.

Amused, Aladdin said "Perhaps you haven't given them enough credit."

"No, it's got to be a fluke. What the Hell?!" the captain exclaimed as one of the attackers did a 180 for no apparent reason, exposing its back to the mechs it had been menacing. Moments later it turned back to face them, but not before an internal explosion had caused half its guns to go silent.

Charlie battalion continued its head long rush towards the city and the ongoing fighting. Its fire support lances slowed momentarily and a wave of LRMs leapt into the sky. Even the Colonel frowned at this, muttering "They can't possibly hope to hit a moving target at that range, especially with no line of sight. Realization dawned, and a growing smile slowly started to win the war with his normal impassive demeanor.

The descending wave of missiles landed, not on the mobile invaders, but on volatile storage tanks at a dozen locations. Cascading explosions erupted, battering the nearby enemies with repeated detonations. As one, the unit leveled its guns on the massive aqueduct and mammoth water storage towers. Bursting under the

onslaught, a deluge of water poured over half of the invaders, and status displays rapidly turned red as battle damaged seals failed under the torrent.

"That can't work. Sir, you pilot a mech, you have to know that that can't possibly work" the captain said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"It's true that mechs that suffer damage underwater can lose integrity even to hits that fail to penetrate the armor. I don't know if a temporary event such as that would have the same effect, as I honestly do not recall anything that would settle the matter one way or the other. I would say that in this instance it would depend on the specific programming of the simulator."

The captain watched in stony silence as the Legion joined the battle in earnest, and rapidly tore their remaining opponents in the city apart. Unlike in every previous battle, a full battalion of the computer controlled GDI mechs was still combat capable after the first two waves were eliminated, and they began following their simplistic programming and moving towards the third set of fifteen enemies as they came over the rebuilt Wall. The Foreign Legion followed close behind, and the GDI forces began to take fire as the insectoid machines crossed the port proper. "Well they're in the open now, so their fancy tricks won't do them any good."

"Hubris should be a four letter word captain." Even as the colonel spoke, thirty-seven mechs fired as one into a colossal fuel storage tank. The detonation, a heartbeat later, was in the kiloton range, and half a dozen of the closest GDI mechs were cast to the ground, with two more torn apart by shrapnel that had moments ago been the Opposing Force. Aladdin momentarily considered calling a halt to the exercise, before deciding that the humbling would likely be good for the captain, and that the troops more than deserved their moment of glory. As the two remaining groups were released, he leaned forward intently to watch the proceedings.

Briefing Room
Port Krin
Antallos
January 5, 2007/3022

A total of eighty-two personnel were crammed into the room, every mechwarrrior and RTO of the line battalion apart from their commander and XO being present. They'd been given an hour and half to report back to allow for food and hygiene after Hale and Dansel were called into the control room. It was an hour after that deadline, and they were still waiting, while rumors spread about various senior officers making their way into the building. Mechwarrior Gary Evellin spotted the door opening and called the group to attention.

"As you were. First off, Hale's going to go down the list of screw-ups." Most of the occupants of the room did their best to suppress a wince, the Major was absolutely merciless about correcting errors, and if anything the XO was worse since he seemed to be able to effortlessly keep track of the entire battalion simultaneously.

"First off, Jankowski. You're a great pilot. We all know you're a great pilot. This doesn't mean you get to grandstand, and it means that you definitely aren't allowed to do a victory dance on top of your last kill. Brox, as above, with the specific direction that you are never again to hump the decapitated head of an enemy mech." The two pilots singled out proceeded to raise the roof as the room broke up in laughter. Hale let it continue for a moment before mildly saying "At ease. Mullen, if you aren't going to fully use your Jenner's mobility I'm sure we can find an Urbanmech so you won't have to worry about having the option anymore. Roderick, when I tell you to engage Sierra Three, that means you engage Sierra Three, not Sierra Five. Burdoch, your lance's fire mission on Bandit Group four was delivered three seconds late from the mark given. It may have worked out, but you know damned well you didn't intend for that to happen." The Captain continued down his list with another twenty minor corrections before concluding "One last thing. Damned fine work Legionnaires, this simulation was supposed to be completely unwinnable even before they added the fifth group just for us."

A moment of shocked silence followed as the batalion attempted to make sense of a completely alien event: receiving un-alloyed praise. The room then erupted in cheers, which Dansel allowed to continue for a full minute before holding up his hand. As the troops quickly settled down he said " Now I have a little presentation to demonstrate exactly *why* we've tried to hammer you into the ground for the last five months. All of you have heard some version of the supposedly legendary run I made when Motherlode was hit, now it's time for you to see what happened."

On the projector screen a tactical display appeared, showing a single green icon and a dozen red lights at a distance. "The first thing to note is that for this battle happened in a location with a dedicated loyal population and sufficient landlines to keep friendly troops informed of enemy locations." Of course, Dansel hadn't received permission for full disclosure, so he left out the fact that while that was certainly the case, it was the satellite coverage and unmanned drones that actually kept the enemy under close observation.

The approach continued on fast forward for a few minutes then reverted to real time as the icon of the Hunchback crested a ridge at the same time one of the aerospace fighters ascended a thousand feet. "Here's where I made my first major error, if I had taken an extra two minutes to move a kilometer and a half to my left, there would have been sufficient tree cover that I might not have been spotted even if the enemy fighter had maintained that height. For the record, my mission objectives were to first eliminate the two Sabres if possible, and second, to keep the enemy occupied in the area so they wouldn't be able to intervene in any of the other battles going on on the planet. I was also to keep my mech vaguely intact if I could manage it."

The review continued, with every sub-par decision being mercilessly dissected as the battalion looked on with a growing sense of numb disbelief that someone would do anything other than incessantly brag about a victory against those kind of odds. "...In the end, the primary failures made fell in two areas. First, that I repeatedly took action with excessive haste and insufficient consideration. Jankowski, what can happen when you take a panicked snapshot at a suddenly

appearing target?"

"You end up buried under a thousand tons of metal."

"And second, that I failed to maintain situational awareness. Captain Hale, what happens when you don't keep track of your surroundings?"

"Some utter lunatic sneaks up on your mech on foot and burns through the rear hatch."

"You may have noticed that the review I just gave was more unforgiving than the ones you are used to receiving. That's because when Hale or I give a stupid order, that's our fault. Out there alone, it was my responsibility to keep track of everything going on, and to make all of the correct decisions in response to the situation. This is why GDI trains with an RTO, a mechwarrrior can only do so much at once, which is why mech battles tend to devolve to a series of duels and small scale brawls. This is especially why Hale moved to the back seat once Graham was cleared for duty." Dansel waited a moment for all of that to sink in before continuing "At this point I have the usual good news bad news spiel. The good news is that you've outperformed the other two battalions. The bad news is that I'm going to expect you to continue to do so, and the officer in charge of simulations just got replaced by someone a lot more competent. So you can expect the training to get tougher, even if I've prevailed upon my superiors to make it against more realistic enemies in future sims. We're also going to be directly exercising against the other battalions in the near-future, since the last shipment of parts needed is due to arrive shortly. The bad news there is that in five days we'll be having an all-hands evolution to assist the techs in getting everything fitted as fast as possible. The good news is that after this evening, your time is your own until 0500 Friday, since by my count I owe you four days of downtime. You'll find new dress uniforms in the barracks, which you are required to wear for the party that starts at 1900. And if I catch any of you on your feet before noon tomorrow, I'll take that as proof that you really don't enjoy partying and time off, and assign you guard duty till everyone else gets back. Dismissed."

Daniel&Sian, Intel, Tau Ceti&Oz

Sian, Capellan Confederation

Dropship *Faith and Trust*

01 January 2007

David rocked awake with the sounds of rockets roaring in his head. He was still tippy from the party last night, and this carried over as he promptly fell out his bunk onto the carpet below. Groggily, he pulled himself back up, and found himself face to glass with a small pitcher of water, one anchored against the acceleration.

He realized that the rockets were external, not internal, and that they must have taken off already. A glance at the clock indicated that he had somehow managed to sleep through liftoff some three hours previous. "I must be getting used to this, to sleep through take-off" David muttered to no one in particular. He grabbed the pitcher, and with a rip of velcro, drank deeply to help fight off the building hangover.

The John Deere representative pulled on some clothes, making sure at least his socks matched. Now that they were off world, his job load decreased as they headed back for their Jumpship. He drank the pitcher empty, then slipped on his shoes as he made his way towards the ships messhall. He entered the small room, and dropped the pitcher in with the other dirty dishes before grabbing a plate and getting himself some leftover breakfast.

Looking around, he saw Daniel, the leader of Tomb Raider sitting by himself. David invited himself to sit across from the Samurai. "Morning" he grumbled.

"Afternoon." Daniel countered. "Sleep well?"

"I'll tell you when I wake up." Juice from a fruit that wasn't found on Earth had found its way into his glass, and David chugged it down, the shock of the flavor snapped to the back of his head, where upon he let the front of it hit the table in front of him.

"Got quite the kick to it, don't you agree?" The Samurai just sounded so smug to the civilian's ears, "Although I hear that it is pretty good at kicking down a hangover."

"I'll tell you after I recover from it trying to kill me."

Daniel laughed. "Well, just be glad. We're meeting up with the *Hail Mary*, as well as a passenger dropship. They're paying us to take them closer to the Free Worlds League, so the usual lockdown on the jumpship is in effect when we get there."

David groaned. "Right. Keep all my stuff in my quarters. Don't go blabbing about Earth, and no playing the DS out in the open. Did you at least get my memo yesterday?"

"No, I haven't checked since yesterday afternoon. Why? Anything important?"

The John Deere executive raised his head to look at the Samurai. "You didn't check your mail this morning? I thought you didn't party at all."

"No, no. Last night was definitely a case of having fun. I'm not the kind of person to be working 24/7, my friend. Even I relax and unwind."

"That... doesn't seem like you."

"It doesn't? Well then, it seems like all you've seen of me is my professional side. Remember, this is a three year round circuit. We're going to know a lot about each other by the time this is all done."

Mercenary Review Board
Galatea, Lyran Commonwealth
02 January 3022

Extract from Standard Updates sent to all Hiring Halls:

Antallos, Periphery:

Capital : Port Krin (CSN)

**Burton Cavalry, Employed by CSN (Global Defense Initiative). Current*

Status: Active, Full Strength. Long Term Contract. Rebuilding Armor corps. Rating: B+ (See Appendix 2A for updated OOB)

**Fire Brands, Employed by CSN (Global Defense Initiative). Current Status: Disbanded due to combat losses, survivors folded into Global Defense Initiative Foreign Legion. Rating: Not Applicable (See Appendix 2B for former OOB. See Appendix 3A for forces transferred to GDI-FL)*

**Fischer's Freelancers, Employed by CSN (Global Defense Initiative). Current Status: Active, Full Strength. Long Term Contract. Rating: C (See Appendix 2A for updated OOB)*

...

Motherlode, Deep Periphery:

Capital: Unknown (CSN)

**Unknown Forces present on World. Presumed Global Defense Initiative presence. (See Section 2: Employers for details)*

...

CSN

Capital: Motherlode

Military: Global Defense Initiative

Leader: House Ryan(?)

This Deep Periphery state possesses at least two worlds (see: Motherlode, Antallos). Heavy use of non-Mech forces. Passive hiring practices, favoring Combined Arms forces over pure Mech companies. Currently Hiring Mercenaries and Individuals (Antallos only). Rating: C (Locked due to new entry) (See Appendix 3A for known OOB)

Office of General Don Davis

GDI Headquarters, Antallos

16 January 2007

Captain Samantha Swift, head of GDI Intelligence on Antallos and Colonel Kurita were shown into the General's office by his aide. The officer closed the door behind them as Davis swept the last of the excess paperwork off his desk. "Afternoon," he greeted his two subordinate officers. They returned the greetings as they took their own seats, and prepared some of their own paperwork. The bi-monthly intelligence briefing was by now a standard for the three of them, the routine down pat.

"Coffee? Tea?" The general asked, despite already knowing the responses. Swift produced a mug, slightly battered, but the words World's Greatest Mom still quite prominent. Davis filled the cup, and then waited while Chou stirred some milk into his tea. He in turn filled his own mug with the dark liquid and waited while everyone prepared themselves. "So, what's new this week?" he eventually prompted.

"The Combine embassy reminded us that their legal delegation will be arriving on the same jumpships as the factory" Chou started off. "The Burons have left on the Circuit, and should arrive back at Sol within 24 hours. Then, the Boeing and BMW groups will board with their equipment, and circuit back to Antallos. They, and the factory should arrive in the first week of February. We'll then use the circuit to send the lawyers back to earth. They'll arrive mid-February then."

"Sounds good. Anything we need to do on our end for the Kuritans?" Davis looked over the paperwork involved. "At least, do we have a dropship that will meet the standards agreed upon by Ambassadors Smith and Kurita?"

"We do, General. Or rather, we will by the time they arrive. Earth is refitting one of the Unions to transport and host VIPs, rather than as a normal transport." The Colonel sighed. "Apparently there are people back home already planning on visits to and from heads of state for the Combine, the FedSuns and the Alliance. Not to mention the USO tours."

Davis nodded. "Alright then, seems like standard issue where foreign dignitaries are involved. From what I've heard back on Earth, the New Zealand Starport is still under construction adjacent to the Auckland International. So the dropship with the Kuritans may be rerouted to Berlin, as it's closer to The Hague, where the trials are taking place."

Chou blinked. "Problems with the Auckland site?"

"Environmental groups are protesting the planned expansion, native groups are raising hell, all on top of the usual infrastructure

problems. The USA is trying to help out, but with other airports around the world being refitted to handle Dropships..." Davis let his statement trail off as he took another sip of coffee. "They may have to move the entire proposed facility either to the North Island, or onto the Australian mainland." The three officers thought about that for a little bit before Davis moved the subject. "On the issue of infrastructure, how are preparations coming along for the factory?"

Swift fielded this question before Chou could reply. "The Combine provided some details about what was needed, and we selected a site in the industrial area on the south side of Port Krin to build the factory on. We hired local contractors to demolish and dismantle the abandoned factories there, and to lay the groundwork for the new one. We also have plans for a dedicated and secure residence for the Boeing/BMW employees. It's under construction now." The Colonel nodded his agreement, although it was his staff that did most of the work involved, with Intel checking details.

"Excellent. I'll get my aide to set a meeting for whoever is going to be in charge of that facility for a month after they arrive so I can get a briefing on what they need, as well as general questions." Davis made a note on a pad of paper, and put it where he could get at it later. "Next?"

"Burgess Hale and Warrior Brox, sir." Captain Swift said as she produced the personnel folders. "Mechwarrior Brox has been spending more and more time with Foreign Legion, and he is making indications that he would like to cancel his contract with Fischer's Freelancers and sign on with the Legion. Dansel, Burgess and Al Azim have already indicated their approval for that, should it happen."

"That could bite us in the ass down the line. With the likelihood of a Wolfnet agent on Antallos, and the use of the Foreign Legion to catch spies sent in with mechs to infiltrate us, we run the high risk of them coming down on us for having a Trueborn as one of our best pilots." Samantha flipped through some additional files. "Although there is no evidence of a Wolfnet agent anywhere - not that means anything if the source material is to go by. These people were apparently very good."

"Have you considered using Brox as bait?" Davis flipped open the relevant folder, and scanned the information therein.

"Not without his permission, and we still aren't sure how far we can trust him. We were actually hoping that the Mad Cat would draw their attention first, but so far the only enquiries have been from the Fed Suns and the Free Worlds League on the mechanics of adding the arms to the base hull. Purely technical stuff." Swift pointed out.

Davis coughed loudly, cutting off Chou's return remark before it began. "That is not an argument for the here and now. Dealing with any Wolfnet agents will occur when we find them, which, I must add, hasn't happened yet. Unless something has changed?" He fixed the two of them with a hard glare.

"No sir." "I have heard nothing."

The General nodded. "Now, about Major Hale?"

"I haven't heard anything bad about him." Chou interjected. "Is there a problem I wasn't aware of?"

"On the contrary, Colonel. Over the past couple months, we've seen a positive change in Burgess' behavior. When the Federated Suns Military retroactively promoted him, we, of course, gave him an equal field promotion." Swift opened the correct folder after a single misstep, and passed it to her superiors.

"Ah yes. And Aladdin Al Azim got Lieutenant Colonel thanks to the pressure from the Arabian kingdoms." Davis recalled. "He's an excellent staff officer."

Swift continued. "Yes sir, but well, based on his actions, both with running the Legion, and now with his own financing..." Her voice trailed off as Chou and Davis sighed. "Sirs?"

"Hale wants us to pay him back. We're still trying to figure out how to tell the politicians back on Earth that a large portion of our Mech forces are being privately funded through one man." Chou explained the conundrum.

"Oh" Swift dead panned. "Well, to get back on track, my section thinks we may have turned Major Hale." That brought a moments silence to the room. "Really?" The General voiced his concern as he noticed that his coffee was empty. He refilled it as Captain Swift elaborated.

"Yes. Burgess shows no signs of wanting to return to the service of the FedSuns, and his command was effectively folded into the GDI forces. Add to that our humane treatment of him after the initial raid - which is unheard of in the Sphere, and Intel now believes he is loyal to us."

"That's quite the change for a man who less than two years ago tried to rob Auckland at the point of a gun." Chou skimmed the relevant papers.

"Yes sir, but think of it from his point of view. We didn't execute him for piracy, we didn't torture him, or his crew for information. We kept our word with him, even during the invasion, and he earned the honest respect of the non-New Zealand forces during the battle of Antallos. He has no reason to leave us."

"I don't think the ANZAC forces in the GDI and CSN will ever forgive him." Davis said as he recalled the latest round of the prank war between Dansel and Burgess on one side, and the New Zealanders on the other. Something about a blue pill and a size-too-small plugsuit. "I presume you're keeping an eye on him?"

"Yes sir. We're still working out what to do with him. Normally, in our service, a turned agent gets retired to a comfortable lifestyle. But with Burgess, we can't exactly do that." Swift confessed a problem with this change, leaving the other two officers also thinking this over.

"Then I suggest we simply table any reactions to that for now, and treat Major Hale as normal." Chou rolled his neck. "Now, as for ComStar, we've sent their letters back to Earth on the Circuit, and explained that it would be at least six weeks before they got a reply. Precentor Long accepted our explanation. He also told us that there

would be some disruptions in communications when the HPG facility is upgraded sometime in the next three to five months. We can expect..."

Tau Ceti, Granville Cluster

Fourth Planet (Unnamed)

18 January 2007

It had taken over a year from the first proposal for a jumpship and attendant dropships to be made available. The Jumpship, given the name *Emerald City* by the new CSN ownership had left the Solar system on the second of January.

Due to the lack of people trained in the fields of xeno-biology, xeno-geology and xeno-anything, the National Geographic Society, with the backing of the Royal Geographical Society, spearheaded the effort to put together crews with the capacities to explore the strange new worlds of the Granville Cluster inside the ISOT event horizon. In response, there had been a gargantuan upswing in the level of public and private donations to these orders, who quickly began to hire the crews and commission the equipment that was felt needed for the surveys.

Despite the source material pointing out that there were dozens of habitable worlds inside the radius of the ISOT, more pragmatic minds pointed out that the maps of the Inner Sphere had stars in the wrong places, and that the Star League held a vast monopoly on terraforming technology, which could be used to make habitable worlds. Thus, the first survey would consist of three systems, all within one jump of each other and Earth. Alpha Centauri, Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani were selected, although only Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani held much hope for a usable world.

The *Emerald City* had jumped into the Tau Ceti system on the 12th, and the dropship *Dorothy Gale* detached from the larger ship. As it began its burn towards the primary, the *Gale* and the *City* triangulated the distant points of light, searching for the ones that moved like planets and not background stars. Within 24 hours, they had identified 4 planetary orbits within 15 AU of the star, and the expected debris disc at 30-50AU. Expectations were raised on both

ships when the third identified world was found to be within the Golden zone for Tau Ceti, at 0.8 AU out.

As the dropship angled towards the planet, spectrography revealed the presence of nitrogen and oxygen as major components of the atmosphere, as well as water vapor. This led to a great deal of celebration on the *Gale* as they realized that this might be just as good as promised, if not better.

And so it was on the 18th of January that the *Gale* landed, and after a draw of straws to see who would be the lucky person to suit up and make first footsteps on this alien planet were the words uttered.

"I claim this planet in the name of Queen Ozma, and name it Oz!"
Silence met this proclamation. Then came the yelling. Lots and lots of yelling.

Observation Lounge
Port Krin Spaceport
Port Krin, Antallos
15 March 3022

Every planet with any kind of regular Dropship traffic had its Dropship watchers, people who made it a hobby watching the comings and going of the huge spacecraft. Their reasons were varied. There were the children fascinated by the light and noise and the wonder of far off worlds. There were the old ones, ex-travelers who for whatever reason no longer wandered the stars and came for the memories of better times. Then there were the people who came for special occasions when something more than the usual freight came in or went out.

Whatever their reasons, some of the busier spaceports set aside floor space so that interested observers could watch out of the elements. Port Krin had such a space, but it had long been neglected as an unnecessary luxury in the wake of the Star League's collapse and the Succession Wars. Sometimes, an Administrator would clean the place up for special occasions, but never for its original purpose; and in any case, they'd inevitably let it lapse into neglect again.

Then the GDI had come in and taken over, cleaned up the place, and opened it to the public. Any interested party could come in be they commoner or noble, ex-slave or mercenary soldier. The GDI didn't care; quite the contrary, they enforced an egalitarian standard and didn't tolerate anyone forcing anyone else to leave just because of whatever social status they might have.

They also rented space for gift shops. Some of those shops even sold products made on 'Earth', although 'Motherlode' was still the more popular name despite it not being official in any way, shape or form. Some of those products were laughably primitive by any but the poorest worlds' standards. Some were insanely cheap for what looked like lostech knick knacks. But most of Earth's products were more often than not, some weird combination of both.

The man known as Remus Lupin examined the small camera he had

just bought. It was expensive given his official income, but hardly bank breaking. At first glance it didn't look like much. The manufacturer, Kodak, had decided to save some production costs by not putting the camera inside packaging, but actually make the camera part of the packaging. But the cheap, primitive appearance belied the advanced interior which took 2D images and stored them digitally. While not unheard of in the Inner Sphere, such systems were usually much heavier and bulkier than what Remus held in his hand. And they were always far, far more expensive than what he had just paid for this tiny thing.

Of course, the camera had come with a warning that the digital format used by the camera wasn't compatible with any Inner Sphere made reader. But that was okay because there was a kiosk where camera buyers could print out hardcopies of pictures they had taken... for a small fee of course.

So armed with his new toy, Remus began snapping pictures like any good tourist.

"Alicia! You look as lovely and radiant as ever."

"Davion dog! How dare you speak to me!"

"Now, now, Alicia. If you keep going on like that, people might think we were married or something."

Remus's attention was drawn over to where Carlos Davion and Alicia Kurita were. Both of them had been initially set up as provisional ambassadors for their respective nations until actual ambassadors arrived. The relations between the two had become rather infamous in short order. Carlos was something of a rake and womanizer with a taste for pretty women. "Pretty" didn't do Alicia justice, and half the words that came out of her mouth involved either putting Davion down or fending off a specific Davion's advances. Some of the people Remus worked with on Antallos were taking bets on when the two would wind up in bed together. Remus of course, was above such things.

But he snapped a picture of the two anyway.

Moving on, Remus made his way through the crowd. It was more crowded today than usual, what with a large number of high ranking and high status people present. GDI Dropships were coming landing today – already had in fact – but it wasn't just the usual shipment of supplies and personnel coming in. It had been officially announced that a whole new Tank Battalion was coming in.

"...concerned that the Combine or the Suns might view this as buildup as an alarm?" the reporter Lois Lane was asking the GDI General when Remus drifted within earshot.

"Not at all, Miss Lane," General Davis replied. "The First GDI Brigade has been understrength in tanks since the Battle of Port Krin despite replacement personnel and equipment sent to us. The new battalion is also bringing in new build tanks that have been designed with modern Inner Sphere weapons and technology in mind. I'm given to understand that they're much more survivable than the Merkavas we've been using."

"More survivable in what way, General?"

"Now, you understand that I can't get into the details..."

Remus snapped a picture of them and moved on.

"Hey, look!" a child at the window announced. "They're coming out!"

And indeed, a parade of vehicles began exiting the *Mule* class Dropship. They were pretty distant, but the kiosks here also happened to sell binoculars and telescopes. Remus didn't have one, but even so, he could make out a few details despite the distance.

Like GDI's Merkavas, these new tanks seemed to be armed with a single large weapon and a single smaller one for anti-personnel use. For some reason, the GDI disdained mounting arrays of secondary weaponry when they could just have one big one. But even so, there was something odd about these tanks that Remus couldn't quite make out. Fortunately, he didn't have to.

"Hey!" exclaimed a teenager with a telescope, "Where's the armor?"

Remus snapped some more pictures.

General's Office
GDI HQ
Port Krin, Antallos

"They sent you here *without armor*?!" Davis roared at the luckless CO of GDI's Third Tank battalion.

"My apologies, General," Lieutenant Colonel Wilhelm Schmidt said with a thick but understandable accent. "Command told us that standard BT grade armor was being produced in Port Krin and that we could get fitted out here."

"They sent you. Here. Without armor," Davis repeated.

"I know, sir," Schmidt continued. "My officers and I objected to the order, as well as the rest of the chain of command. Or so I have heard."

"They sent you here, to Antallos, without armor," Davis said again, shaking his head.

"I am given to understand that there is a bottleneck on production of BT grade armor back home," Schmidt explained. "Production priority is going to new tanks earmarked for national militaries and ship construction. Home is trying to increase production as fast as possible, but..." He shrugged helplessly.

"Colonel," Davis sighed, "do the people have any idea what kind of black eye they just gave to our public image in the Inner Sphere?"

"Black eye, sir?" Schmidt asked, confused.

**Lockheed Martin Headquarters
Bethesda, Maryland
United States of America, Earth
January 17, 2007/3022**

Brian Kirkpatrick silently stood in thought as he looked out through one of large reflective, one-way windows that covered the outside wall of the Lockheed Martin executive board room. The evening lights of Bethesda began to twinkle softly as the evening set in early as it was prone to do this time of year. Watching the lights come on helped to ease his unease. This wasn't the first time he had been in this room. No, he had been here on numerous occasions beforehand to present projects and brief on them. However, this was the first time he had ever been in this room with so many people who were not only from outside of the company, but who had been direct competitors and enemy's when he had begun working for Lockheed back in 1981.

"Brian," Bob Stevens, the current CEO of Lockheed Martin spoke up. "It seems we have everyone here. If you'd please...."

Nodding his head in acknowledgment the 56 year-old engineer silently wondered how he had gotten to this point. By all rights he should've been getting ready for retirement in a few years, not preparing to head up the most ambitious project that the company had conceived of yet. He had worked on the F-22 and that fighter's would be successor, the F-35, but this...this would leave both of those well and truly behind.

"Gentlemen," Bob Stevens began as people found their seats around the large conference table or shifted in them to get more comfortable. "As you are all keenly aware Boeing industries and BMW both won the contract for the Mech factory that the Draconis Combine has gifted the CSN and moved to Antallos. You are aware of this as all of our companies attempted to win that contract for ourselves. This is the reason why we have all gathered here together."

Looking around the room Stevens saw the faces of people whom he had met at many an aerospace conference, business conventions,

and/or because Lockheed Martin had outbid them or been outbid by them for a contract. Each and every one of them internally seethed at the fact that they had lost the multi-billion dollar contract offered to refurbish and then run the Mech factory. Though he was the only CEO present, something that had been decided in order to try and keep the new partnership between all of their companies secret until they were ready to announce as well as because Lockheed had been the one to propose the joint venture and do most of the leg work in getting every party to arrive, each person at the table was important enough to make decisions for the company they represented.

"Hmmpf, the boys and girls down in legal were ready to start launching anti-trust suits and make accusations of corrupt business practices when Boeing won the contract," Mark Liktos, a representative from Northrop Grumman, noted with a snort. "How exactly is this any different?"

"For that I turn you over to our resident lawyer-in-chief," Bob said with a chuckle.

All eyes at the table turned to look at a white haired man wearing wireframe spectacles and dressed in a tweed suit. Nearly all of them knew who he was, Lord John Ashbury was a legend in international economics and law. The man had studied at Oxford and Harvard and had then proceeded to teach at both of his alma maters as well as at Stanford and Cambridge. He had also been on several advisory committees at the UN, the World Bank, and called in several times for G8 and G20 summits. He was literally one of the most knowledgeable men regarding trade law and economics currently alive.

"Yes, well, *harrumph*," the immensely British man noted as he cleared his throat. "The answer to your question is in fact quite simple really. You see all of you gathered here are still separate companies and corporations. This venture you are entering into is basically a joint venture and partnership and not an actual merger. You are also acting in an international sense and with this distinction many of the domestic anti-trust laws can not be properly applied. At the same time because of the nature of this venture you are actually slipping through one of the larger loopholes in international trade agreements."

"And should someone decide to target us," Hikio Natsura, the representative from Mitsubishi, noted. "You will of course be defending us in whatever court is required, won't you Ashbury-san?"

"Of course," the white haired man returned with a grin. "You all will be, after all, paying me a considerable fee for my expertise and abilities. It would be impolite and against my contract to simply advise you and then not carry through on any actual legal concerns that should arise. However, considering the political playing field at the moment I doubt any major issues will be raised."

"And even if they are it will most likely be too late and we will have already secured our position," Bob Stevens commented.

"Yes, it does help when you have certain...connections," Andre Grapillon the Dassault Group representative noted, knowing full well that every company represented in the room had major ties with their home governments and had quite the fair stable of politicians to call upon when and if needed.

"Oh come now," U.S. Senator Robert McKynter of California, a leading member on the Senate Armed Services Committee, interjected with a chortle, "You make us sound so easy and rather untrustworthy...and after all that me and my colleagues have done to help facilitate this meeting."

"Indeed," Pierre Lefote, a leading member of the Palais Bourbon, commented, "It was not easy making sure this meeting and the other setting it up did not leak to the papers. Can you imagine how your competitors would feel knowing that you are all here preparing to launch what is essentially one of the greatest military proposals since the Manhattan Project?"

Around the table the gathered businessmen sent the small group of diplomats and politicians from their home countries nods of thanks. While the public would probably have been supportive of the group, what with the spirit of cooperation being so strong right now, many of their direct competitors would probably throw fits if they learned about the meetings that had laid the groundwork for this one.

Thankfully their contacts with the political machine had paid off, keeping the entire affair relatively secret as they had gathered to here the some of the major aspects of the proposal that had been floated to them over the last few months. Now it was just a matter of hearing the major details of this venture that was drawing them together. Once that was done they could get down to the more specific points.

"Hmm, yes," Bob hummed in agreement, this was indeed going to be a major endeavor. "Now I would like to focus our attention back on the matter at hand, the reason that we have come together and the overall goal of this venture. Brian, if you would please?"

Standing up and moving to the far wall as the light dimmed and the projection screen lit up, Brian Kirkpatrick began, "As you are all aware victory in modern warfare in the last century and into this new one has been decided ultimately by airpower. Dominance of the skies has led armies to victory as they were able to cut off their enemy's supplies and reinforcements as well as reduce entire formations of troops to little more than the exercise of proverbially shooting fish in a barrel. To this end we have seen the development of some of the most fantastic airframes in order to secure and maintain the idea of air superiority and tactical ability."

With those words the first slide came up. The images on the screen were of four well known aircraft, the F-117 Nighthawk, the B-2 Spirit, the F-22 Raptor, and the F-35 JSF.

"These were the greatest aircraft modern warfare has seen on this planet," Brian stated with a hint of pride in his voice as he had worked directly in the last two. "They have the most sophisticated electronics packages, carried the best weapons, could out fly nearly everything else in the sky, and had the added advantage of utilizing 'stealth' technologies to hide them almost completely from sensors. However...."

The slide shifted. The images now being shown were now both familiar and yet still alien in nature. The screen now showed a Union class Dropship, a Leopard class Dropship, an Invader Class Jumpship, a Seydlitz Aerospace Fighter, and a Sparrowhawk Aerospace fighter.

"These are the new faces of power in the skies," Kirkpatrick supplied as he highlighted and then enlarged each image as he went through them. "We have seen ships capable of entering and leaving the atmosphere under their own power and capable of doing so multiple times. These craft measure from being multi-storied giants to smaller, fleeter craft that can run rings around many of our most modern fighters. On top of that these craft have superior firepower and armor, meaning they can outlast anything we have in production. Now we are look-...."

"Ahem," David Crowley of BAE Systems interrupted, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't a number of our current air superiority fighters shoot down these 'superior' fighters during the invasion?"

Taking an immediate dislike to the high and mighty tone the British man had effected...that or it was the Irish Catholic in him, Kirkpatrick sternly replied, "You are correct in that our fighters did manage to shoot down all of the Aerospace Fighters encountered during the invasion, however, that is neither a valid comparison of the technologies nor is it a true example of the purported capabilities of the enemies we will face in the future."

"Gentlemen, if I may?" Bob Stevens interjected. "We have seen that our fighters can engage this new threat, however, doing so came with a high cost. Our current 4th generation and 5th generation fighters sent against the pirate invasion force killed ever pirate Aerospace Fighter, but in doing so they paid a heavy price. 4th generation fighters suffered a total of 47% casualty rate and 5th generation fighters, of whom the United States is currently the full operator of, suffered 15% casualty rate."

"Such numbers are...deceptive," Sergei Mischklov of Sukhoi threw in. "Battletech Aerospace Fighter is far deadlier than numbers suggest. Our pilots only encountered dozen or so of these Aerospace Fighters and these fighters were dispersed across globe, not concentrated."

"Yes sir," Brian Kirkpatrick agreed as he steered the conversation back to the presentation at hand. "Had the pirates concentrated their fighters and had more of them the casualty rates for the military squadrons who encountered them would have been much higher. If

the pirates had been a well equipped House unit or ComStar unit with a dedicated Aerospace Fighter Corps the casualty estimates are staggering."

"What are the estimates, Kirkpatrick-san," Natsura inquired politely.

His unblinking eyes reflecting his seriousness, Kirkpatrick responded solemnly, "If our current squadrons were to encounter their Inner Sphere counterparts in a situation where numbers were equal...well it would be bad. Conservative estimates place the casualty rate for 4th generation equipped fighter squadrons at nearly 78% on the first day while 5th generation equipped units would have casualty rate of 46% on the first day while the Inner Sphere units would suffer anywhere from 32-56% casualty rates. As time progresses the numbers contin-...."

"Excuse me," Ken Wilkerson of Daimler-Chrysler interrupted, "But why is there such an open range on enemy casualty rates?"

"Unlike our military air units," Bob Stevens began, taking over for Brian. "The Inner Sphere has a far wider range of fighters to choose from and with which to compose their units according to the source material. We could face anything from the light fighters weighing in at 20tons to the assault fighters that weigh in at 100tons. Each weight class has its own advantages and disadvantages in terms of speed, armor, and weaponry. Our estimates are based upon encountering a mixed Aerospace fighter unit that has a variety of weights in it but focuses upon one or two particular classes for the core of the squadron. It would seem that many of my colleagues in the defense industry have been previously briefed on this matter beforehand. Even if we armed every fighter currently available with the missiles necessary to penetrate BT grade armor we would still see casualty rates nearly as high as the initial assessments. Recall that we said that these were conservative estimates. If the Inner Sphere sent a massed assault of their best Aerospace Fighters against us it could turn into a relative shooting gallery with our planes coming out on the losing end. BT Aerospace Fighters just have too many advantages in terms of armor and weapons at the moment."

Looking around the table Stevens saw the faces of the representatives

of Dassault, Sukhoi, Saab, Northrop Grumman, the Mikoyan-i-Gurevich Design Bureau, and even BAE systems all grimly nod in acknowledgement. Not a one of them dismissed the capabilities or the pilots employed by their home militaries, in fact they all felt a great deal of pride in having produced some of the finest aircraft and weapon systems ever and then discovering that the pilots chosen to use them had pushed them above and beyond what had originally been imagined. However, it was hard to dismiss stone-cold statistics and carefully crafted estimates, especially when those statistics and estimates meant the deaths of not only the pilots that flew the aircraft that they had labored so hard to produce but later on the deaths of themselves and all of the others that the pilots had sworn to defend.

"There is some good news, however," Brian Kirkpatrick spoke, getting back to the presentation as he focused the screen onto the image of the F-22. "We do hold advantages in our 'stealth' capabilities and in the capabilities of the electronics employed in our fighters. The F-22 is currently the pinnacle of this advantage, limited only in quantity. The older 4th generation fighters, while not having 'stealth' capabilities, do still have an advantage in their electronic packages."

"Such...advantages," Ivan Gurelgo, the representative from MiG began, "Are hardly enough, that is what you are saying, yes?"

"That is correct sir," Kirkpatrick answered with a nod of his head. "Even if we replaced every fighter the militaries of Earth have in service with F-22s it would not be enough. Our fighters are simply not built tough enough to take on and defeat their equivalent Battletech counterparts."

"What about expanding missile production?" David Crowley inquired. "The GDI and many of our own national militaries are calling for better missiles that can punch through that thick armor that the Inner Sphere seems to love. Better missiles are going to cost us all less to make and still rake in a tidy profit for us."

"It isn't just about being able to counter this new foe," Brian Kirkpatrick answered quickly. "Better missiles will only do so much. Battletech based Aerospace Fighters can literally appear almost out of

nowhere should they be launched from a Dropship in orbit. Producing the requisite number of missiles to take on such threats is merely a temporary solution. In order to secure air superiority wherever Earth desires we will need something that is more than just a temporary measure."

"This is why we have all gathered here," Bob Stevens spoke up, as he poured himself a glass of water from one of the metal pitchers on the conference table. "We are here to address this problem as well as others that have been raised regarding the retention of air superiority for our various armed forces. Brian, if you would please...."

"Yes sir," the Lockheed engineer replied as he shifted the image on the screen to one depicting a hanger filled with a number of new craft inside it. "Gentlemen, these are the spoils of war recovered from the fighting on Antallos. The GDI has shipped back nearly every fighter that they recovered there and have just recently released a list of these spoils as well as pictures of each design recovered. In total there are 8 different designs of fighter that have been recovered and these designs represent the entire gamut of the Inner Sphere's weight class system."

"8 different designs at our disposal and there are supposed to be even more in current service with Inner Sphere forces?" Wilkerson spoke up and let out a low whistle. "We'll need to really play catch up if we want to field comparable aircraft before someone out there realizes that the GDI is significantly vulnerable to massed air assaults."

"Such an attack can be mitigated by properly outfitting ground forces with anti-air weaponry and by using numerous SAM launchers," Andre Grapillon stated. "However, that would not be a perfect solution given that we could face massed air assaults, unless GDI forces are willing to detonate tactical nuclear weapons in the atmosphere over a battlefield that is."

That statement brought a bit of uncomfortable silence to the meeting. The deployment of nuclear weapons had long been a bogeyman that all those present had grown up with during the Cold War. Using nukes to help fight off the pirate invasion of earth had been a decision made by the various nuclear powers belonging to the CSN

and had been the first line of defense against an invader from space. However, using nuclear weaponry in space was one thing, using nukes in the atmosphere of a habitable planet or actually on the surface of such a world was something different. No one was truly willing to advocate such a thing partially out of old fears and partially due to the frenzy it would cause amidst the anti-proliferation and use groups.

"Hmm, yes, there is quite the number of types of craft flying about the Inner Sphere's skies, not to mention the numerous Mech types tromping around on the ground. But then what would you expect from a civilization that is fighting using multiple refurbished weapons that have salvaged who knows how many times, " Kirkpatrick stated, gaining a few short laughs from the assembled group as he broke the tension in the room. "Now as for the Aerospace Fighters, the GDI has available 6 Seydlitz, 4 Sholagar, 6 Sparrowhawk, 3 Corsairs, 2 Lucifer, 4 Shilone, 2 Stingray, and 2 Slayer Class Aerospace Fighters for R&D work. The first three that I named, according to the weight classification system that is utilized by the Inner Sphere, are all lights. The Corsair the Lucifer, Shilone, and Stingray are all mediums, and the Slayer is a heavy."

"What? They didn't capture any assault class fighters?" Crowley asked suddenly, a bit of arrogance in his noticeable British public school accented voice.

"That is a misnomer, as no such class exists," Kirkpatrick corrected, wishing that the man had actually read the source material before coming to this meeting. "While Aerospace Fighters range from the lightest at 20tons and the heaviest being 100tons, much like BattleMechs do, they are not organized in the same weight classification system. You have lights, mediums, and heavies. Lights are anything from 20-45tons, mediums anything from 50-65tons, and heavies being 70-100tons."

"Gentlemen," Bob Stevens spoke up, drawing the focus back to what he considered to be of more importance than such semantics. "I believe that by working together to present a united bid we can gain access to the majority of these fighters if not all of them. From there we can test, tinker, and take apart these fighters in order to learn

their secrets and then we c-....

"And then we begin producing our own fighters," David Crowley finished with a wry grin. "Oh that's good. That's very good old boy. We'll be able to dominate the fighter market for at least a decade if not longer should we all work together."

"Exactly," Stevens responded, slightly annoyed that the Brit had interrupted him. "However, this is but only a single part of our overall goal. Brian...?"

"Yes sir," Kirkpatrick answered as the images on the screen switched to the images of several bulbous craft and a few aerodyne craft. "The GDI has also released a list of the Dropships that were captured on Antallos as well. They are making available for R&D a number of Unions and Leopards along with a few Buccaneers, a Leopard CV, several Mules, and a Fortress Class Dropship."

"We will bid to get look at these as well, yes?" Gurelgo inquired quite assuredly.

"Of course," Bob Stevens answered. "However, do to their larger nature I believe we should limit the bid to only look at the Fortress, the Leopard CV, a few Mules, a few Leopards, and a few of the Buccaneers."

"Your reasoning being?" Hikio Natsura inquired, asking the question that weighed on the others minds.

"Each of those classes offers a far better overall look as well as a specific look at Dropship construction and use," Brian Kirkpatrick answered, knowing that his boss would approve as this was part of the presentation. "The Mule Class Dropship is mainly a civilian freighter and carries little military value. The knowledge to build such a type of Dropship can be easily inferred from looking at the carrying capacity of the others. The Fortress Class is rather unique in that it is designed as a true ground assault craft, being heavily armored and armed with a BT artillery piece to help clear its landing zone. It can carry 12 Mechs, 12 armored vehicles of various sizes and weights, and 3 platoons of infantry. It is far better than the Union

Class in both armor, armament, and carrying capacity and also not only rivals but also surpasses the larger Overlord Class in areas of armor and armament. The Leopard CV on the other hand, is a dedicated Aerospace Fighter Carrier and studying it would allow us insight into how to produce carrier Dropships of our own. The Buccaneers were originally going to be dismissed, but...."

"But in the course of the Battle for Prot Krin the GDI made great use of the Leopards they had modified to supply close air support," Stevens interjected wanting to get to the meat of the discussion. "However, reports from the crews of those Leopards reported that it was somewhat difficult to keep the Leopards stable enough to provide the accurate fire needed to support ground troops. Some of the Lockheed Engineers believe that the Buccaneer may offer a more stable platform as it has larger wings than the Leopard does while mounting comparable armor."

"We were under the impression at Daimler-Chrysler that all of the modified Leopards that went with the Expeditionary Force were heavily damaged, some of them even destroyed," Ken Wilkerson interjected, voicing a concern that some at the table shared. "Forgive me for asking, but how would modified Buccaneers be any better?"

"Other than possibly having greater stability they wouldn't," Kirkpatrick answered, his boss holding up his hands to forestall any outbursts at that statement. "The Buccaneers are not solely being looked at for modification, such a thing is merely a stop-gap measure. We are instead proposing using the information gained from the modified Leopards' performances and information from the Buccaneers to create a new ground support Dropship that will not only replicate the lauded abilities of the AC-130 'Spooky' Gunship but also include the armor and armament necessary for such a Dropship to defend itself properly from airborne threats. This along with properly designed and employed Aerospace Fighters would give GDI forces air superiority as well as much needed close-air support."

"Interesting," Natsura spoke up, his tone remaining calm and polite, "We would copy the best designs to establish ourselves in the market relatively quickly and gain favor with an equipment hungry GDI. But back to the new designs that you think we should examine. Would

these proposed Dropships also be able to carry the bombs that were only partially utilized by the modified Leopards on Antallos?"

"Yes sir, we are proposing that such a capability also be included," Brian answered, taking a liking to the Japanese man who always seemed to ask pertinent questions. "Some of the engineers are suggesting possibly incorporating the bomb launcher designs from the B-2 as it would also allow such a Dropship to carry larger ordinance such as Tomahawk Cruise Missiles, the American made MOAB, the Russian made FOAB, the proposed Massive Ordinance Penetrator, as well as nuclear ordinance if necessary. We are also thinking that it could be utilized to deploy airborne troops and equipment needed by them."

"Would these proposed Dropships also replace the Monitor class that is currently in service?" Ferdinand Stasel of Saab asked, entering the discussion for the first time.

"Possibly, we could build a true replacement for the Monitor class off of the same chassis and thus maximize our production capabilities while keeping costs down," Bob Stevens answered, fielding the question in order to give Brian a chance to prepare to move onto to eh next major discussion point. "We can all agree that the Monitor class is a stop-gap measure seeing as how the only Monitor currently in service is a hodgepodge of technologies and parts. While it has been upgraded since its initial launch it would be hard pressed to fight off some of the true Assault Dropships that many of the Successor States have available according to the Battletech source materials. In the near future we will need true Assault Dropships and what the Battletech source material refers to as 'Pocket' Warships."

"I'm unfamiliar with that last term," David Crowley said, having only skimmed much of the BT material presented to him before this meeting. "What are these 'Pocket' Warships?"

Grinning slightly over the fact that British engineer had to ask such a question, what with the history of British naval forces and their battles, Stevens replied, "They are Assault Dropships that have been armed with Capital Class and Sub-capital Class weaponry. They are designed to easily kill any other Dropship out there and to be able to

harass, cripple and/or kill all but the largest Warships by working in pairs or in larger groups."

"I was under the impression that we didn't have to worry about facing Warships for quite sometime," Stasel remarked, leaning forward slightly to rest his elbows on the conference table. "I thought the briefings and source materials all said that the Successor States lost their Warship fleets almost a full century ago."

"They did, however, I would remind you that one major power in the Inner Sphere still has a large fleet of Warships and has managed to keep it a relative secret," Kirkpatrick returned, flipping the images on the projector to the artistic renderings of BT Warships along with a logo that was becoming a familiar topic of discussion in many corporate communities. "According to the source material, ComStar has a large fleet of Warships and while the majority of these ships are mothballed and most likely lack trained crews to operate them it would only take a few of these craft to...."

"That is why we have nuclear shield being built," Ivan Gurelgo interjected forcefully. "No ship will be able to threaten Earth so long as we have nuclear missiles deployed in orbit to defend us."

"That may be sir, but such a shield is limited in its capabilities," Brian commented and then began to explain. "The shield you are referring to only defends this planet. The GDI will need fighting ships to protect other worlds that we may colonize and acquire. Also, the shield, while formidable, is only one line of defense. Against a determined, fanatical enemy it would be prudent to have as many options and weapons as possible."

Silence reigned in the conference room for a moment. Each man present, even if they hadn't fully read their briefings or any of the Battletech source material, knew that ComStar was possibly the largest threat that Earth could potentially face in the near future merely from the hushed rumors and conversations that permeated the halls of their places of work. Not a single person who worked in an industry that was based upon what the Inner Sphere would consider advanced technology desired to see ComStar suddenly show up. The techno-cult was at this point in time still rather fanatical in their

beliefs and would most likely either seek to take control of earth and its technologies or simply wipe them out completely. The order also had a rather nasty history of infiltration, assassination, sabotage, and kidnapping if the rumors and source materials were to be believed.

"This brings us to the final part of our presentation," Bob Stevens noted, breaking the silence as he also nodded to Brian to continue.

Nodding in acknowledgement the engineer and father of four began to speak once again, "While the production of Aerospace Fighters and Dropships are a priority we should also look to begin designing and production of 'true' Warships in the future. Such ships would...."

"Pardon my interruption," Mark Liktos said as he fidgeted with the pen in his hand. "But how exactly are we supposed to begin designing such craft. Unlike the fighters and Dropships we have no examples to work from other than artistic renderings and stats on game sheets. We all know that such things hardly constitute the necessary information to actually successfully design and produce an actual working craft."

"You are correct sir," Kirkpatrick answered. "However, we are predicting that we will possibly be able to gain access to real design specifications in the near future."

"How?" Liktos asked, tapping his pen on the table for emphasis.

"Ahem," Bob Stevens coughed into his fist, drawing he attention of everyone present. "Some of you are aware of this through your government contacts, others of you, however, are not. I have been given permission by the military and President Ryan, due to the nature of the information having passed to the Lockheed Skunk Works when we supplied a few engineers for the missions, to share this with those we deem as necessary to the completion of future projects."

"Really?" Mark Liktos remarked, a hint of suspicion in his tone. "Forgive me for not believing you immediately but I'd like some confirmation from some of our political friends before I'm party to what could have us drawn up on charges of treason."

"Of course," Stevens returned knowingly. "Gentlemen, if you would be so kind?"

"It's true," Congressman Douglas Adams of Tennessee, a prominent member of the Congressional Oversight Committee, commented. "I was in the meeting with a few others from my committee as well as members from the Armed Services Committee and the Secretary of Defense discussed the matter with the Joint Chiefs and the President."

"The Prime Minister had a similar conversation which I was privy to," William Dukard, one of the major power brokers in the British House of Commons, supplied. "Apparently our governments are all slightly worried about the fact that the enemy could appear on our doorstep again. The only solution they see at this time is cooperation and collaboration."

"Now if your fear are put to rest...", Bob said, getting a nod in return from the Northrop Grumman rep as well as a number of other people at the table. "Around the time of the Antallos mission two other missions were also launched. Each of these other missions involved the use of covert ops and Special Forces drawn from the states currently aligned in the CSN. The objective of these missions is to secure Star League era data cores, one being on the planet Helm and the other being on the lost planet of New Dallas. We are still waiting to hear back in regards to the success of these missions, but if even just one should succeed Earth will have access to many of the technologies and knowledge of the greatest power the Inner Sphere has so far seen."

Silence once again covered the room as those who had not already known about the missions processed the new information. Those who had already known about the missions simply sat back in their chairs, wry grins on their faces as visions of the money to be made and the technologies to be explored danced in their heads. They may have lost out on the contract for the Mech factory on Antallos, but that was an old relic compared to what they could produce from the data that could soon be in their hands.

"Gentlemen," Bob Stevens spoke, his tone commanding as the lights

came up and Brian Kirkpatrick sat down. "You have heard the proposal and its goals. I have spoken personally with each and every one of your company's CEOs. They assure me that each of you was sent here to not only evaluate but also formally sign on to the outlined project if you thought it to be worthwhile to your companies. So I ask you, will you work with us to make this proposal a reality?"

Mark Liktos of Northrop Grumman was the first to answer, "Heh, where do we sign up? Northrop will support this venture."

"Good," Stevens remarked, having suspected that the ties that Lockheed had fostered with Northrop over the years would pay off here. "The shipyards and dry-docks that your company has at Newport News could possibly be of great benefit to this venture."

"Your proposal has great merit, Stevens-san," Hikio Natsura of Mitsubishi commented. "Hmm, producing the craft that you proposed will be costly, but the benefits and rewards outweigh such costs. Many of my country men have fallen in love with their proposed Land-Air-Mechs. It will be enjoyable seeing their faces when we roll out our first fighters and Dropships in a mere fraction of the time they waste attempting to perfect their 'toys'. Mitsubishi will agree to this venture as well."

"Arigato my friend," Stevens responded politely, having hoped that his rather logical and careful friend would decide to join. "You company has long been friendly with ours and we have produced some of the best electronics in the world together. The heavy industry and production lines that you operate could serve us all well."

"Heh, well we're in then," Ken Wilkerson of Daimler Chrysler announced with a short laugh. "We've been working with Mitsubishi since the 1970's, why break up a good thing when it is given the potential to not only grow further, but also rake in substantial profits as well."

"Well then," David Crowley noted with a smirk and a nod. "I guess we ought to get right to it, no need to delay further when there is money

to be made."

"We will also join this venture," Ferdinand Stasel of Saab commented in his usual calm tone.

"As shall we," Andre Grapillon of Dassault agreed with a nod. "As our American and British friends noted, the potential for substantial profits is too good to pass up."

"Sergei, Ivan...what do you think?" Bob Stevens asked, turning his head to look at the two Russians, having suspected that they would be the toughest to convince.

"What you propose...is not easy," Sergei Mischklov of Sukhoi returned, steepling his fingers in front of his face. "There is much distrust in my company despite the friendly relations that have been cultivated with the West and Mother-Russia becoming part of the NATO Alliance only a few years ago."

"Da, is true," Ivan Gurelgo of MiG said calmly in agreement with his fellow countryman. "Even if we should agree our government may not permit its two greatest aircraft makers to ally fully with wester-...."

"That point has actually been addressed according to my understanding," Stevens interjected. "I have it on good authority that that President Ryan has spoken with your President about potential joint ventures. Such dialogue was begun even before the Auckland Raid. I believe it originated with talks regarding the F-35 project and the competing projects that both of your companies were trying to develop."

"Da," Josef Krusklov, a key player in the Federation Council of Russia, commented. "Both the President and the Prime Minister approved of the dialogue when we formerly entered into NATO. Your own... progress on such projects was felt to be...lacking, yes? It was originally thought that talks would properly motivate both companies, what with the spirit of capitalism so firmly rooted in us all now."

While both Russian businessmen gritted their teeth at the slight insult to their companies they knew that it was partially deserved. It was no secret that both Sukhoi and MiG had been trying to develop a 5th generation 'stealth' fighter to compete against the American built F-22 and the newly designed F-35. It was also no secret that both projects had made lackluster progress due to funding problems and the small conflict between Russia and China a few years earlier. Both Russian companies had only developed basic prototypes, all of which had not lived up to the goals of the project, though secretly at least one had shown merit. However, that prototype had been lost, secretly sold off on the black market and subsequently destroyed through the efforts of the NSA, though that was not common knowledge.

Bob Stevens was one of the few who actually knew some of the details behind it and decided that now was the perfect time to set the hook he had baited, "I have also have it on good authority that President Ryan is contemplating sharing the technology behind the F-22 and F-35 project with those willing to work with us to develop what is needed for the defense of Earth and all of its peoples. Of course such technology can not just be given out freely, but those who are seen to be working hand in hand with others for the greater good will find favor and...."

"We would be granted access to the aircraft?" Sergei asked, the eagerness in his tone hardly hidden.

"Possibly, there would of course need to be assurances made that the technology would not be allowed to fall into the hands of some of the more rogue elements that still inhabit our world, that and making clear certain understandings regarding patents and keeping certain things classified for the security of all of our countries," Bob replied, sure that he only needed to begin slowly reeling in now in order to land this big fish. "Lockheed Martin was the developer behind the F-22 and the F-35. Currently the F-35 has yet to enter full production and most likely never shall in light of recent developments. However, if we were to fold the F-35 project's budget and specialists into our bid for this new project we would all gain a distinct advantage over any others who decided to toss their hat into the ring."

"So long as you boys continue to play ball with the rest of us as part

of NATO, the CSN, and the GDI, President Ryan has made indications that such exchanges would be permissible," Adams commented, the Congressman leaning forward to fold his hands on the table.

"However, we would need a guarantee from both of your companies that shared technologies would not be...misused."

"Just as the President and Prime Minister have requested similar guarantees from the Americans," Krusklov added, the Russian showing that he was indeed in-the-know.

"But of course," Senator McKynter replied giving a slight nod. "We all know that sooner or later the Inner Sphere will come knocking on the door. To keep them polite we'll need the necessary equipment and the best way to produce it in the numbers we all need is by working together rather than slitting each others throats."

Pausing for a moment to contemplate the politicians' words, Ivan Gurelgo finally spoke, "We would be looking at the inclusion of 'stealth' into all of projects, yes? It would be necessary for all of us to be...oh how do you say it? On same page of book?"

"Yes, we would indeed all need to be on the same page," Stevens responded, deciding to let the final piece slip into place and land his catch. "While there of course would be some concerns regarding how to properly apply 'stealth' to craft that will be operating in space as well as repeatedly entering and exiting atmosphere, I'm sure we can come up with a proper solution if we were to have our best minds collaborate. There is also the data and materials left over from the failed SR-91 program and the military space shuttle program."

With those words Robert J. Stevens, CEO of Lockheed Martin, knew he had hooked the two Russians. The SR-91 program had been a proposed project to replace the SR-71 with a craft that would not just fly close to the where atmosphere ended and space began, but actually fly in space in order to fulfill its mission and avoid detection. The military shuttle program was a smaller project that had met with limited success, with currently only a single craft in current use and mainly being used as a test bed for technology that NASA could not be trusted to use due to its classified nature. Both projects had been rumors and the stuff of legend in the aerospace community for years.

However, Stevens knew that the Russians had long suspected the truth and greatly desired to actually see the data and info regarding the testing done for both the failed SR-91 and the single prototype military shuttle.

Licking his lips like a hungry wolf, Sergei Mischklov remarked, "So long as your government and mine approve and we can be assured of the sharing of necessary technologies for the mutual defense of Earth...I believe that I can agree to have Sukhoi join this venture."

"Ivan?" Bob asked, waiting to see what the other Russian's response would be.

"With guarantee that you personally give in writing then...", the rather burly man began. "...Da. We shall work together to develop technology and tools necessary to fight those who would try and take advantage of Mother-Earth."

"Excellent," Stevens replied happily as he let a toothy grin crease his lips. "Lord Ashbury, if you would be so kind?"

"Ah, but of course," the British man in the tweed suit remarked as he opened his briefcase and pulled out a large stack of papers. "These are the basic contracts that will be needed in order to formalize this joint venture on the behalves of your companies. Of course some of the details, such as production and testing sights, will need to be hammered out more fully once you all have successfully bid the proposed venture to the CSN and GDI, but that has been noted already. I believe you all brought along a few of your own lawyers in order to look these over?"

"Of course Ashbury-san," Natsura commented politely, "It is not that we don't trust you but...."

"Ah, no offense taken old boy," the old British expert on economics and international law stated with a laugh, "It is the nature of business. One can't be too careful."

"I assure you that you will find everything that has been discussed here in those documents and that there are no surprises lurking in

them," Robert Stevens supplied as several young men and women clad in waiters attire walked into the room carrying bottles of champagne and fine crystal glasses. "We will all get what we desire by working together in this venture. We will defend our world, gain access to and produce the greatest technologies in the universe, and we will reap a great deal of profit in doing so."

Every person at the table nodded their head in agreement, the sound of corks being popped accompanying them and punctuating their actions. They would all get what they desired and potentially more. The public relations windfall would be great as it would be just what the majority of the public desired, the image of cooperation and action be undertaken in the name of defending the world as a whole. Oh sure they would be those who would complain and raise certain issues, but then that is what all of the public relations personnel and lawyers that their companies employed were there for.

"Gentlemen, if you would join me," Robert Stevens said, rising to his feet a glass of champagne in his hand as his fellows all received their own glasses of the sparkling alcohol. "To our dominance of the sky."

"To our dominance of the sky!" all of the various men of different companies and nationalities intoned as they raised their glasses before drinking deeply.

Savoring the crisp taste of the champagne on his tongue Stevens spoke again with a grin, "Now let us all adjourn to the hall outside. I have made certain that proper refreshments are available for us to partake in on this momentous occasion."

Filing out of the room the men all spoke with one another as they began to hash out the details that would need to be formalized once the venture truly began. There would need to be production lines set up, special tools and machines made, material scientists and engineers to prepare, resources to gather, designers and test pilots to get ready, and of course the different project teams to be assembled. Each of their companies would play a role and together they would all reap the profits.

"Sir," Brian Kirkpatrick remarked as he came to stand next to his boss

as they followed behind the throng of influential and powerful businessmen. "Do you think this will all work as you hope?"

"Oh don't get me wrong Brian. I'm hardly naïve, just as none of them are," Stevens replied as he noted that Sergei Mischklov had just found the Beluga Caviar that had been flown in fresh from Russia earlier in the day. "We all recognize that there will be problems and hiccups along the way. However, the potential for profit and dominating the market is just too good to pass up and that is not the only benefit. We will gain a great deal of political capital and public relations capital from the CSN and GDI when we formally announce our joint venture bid and our proposed projects. There are many who would say that working together in such fashion will not last long and will become impossible, but they don't understand the situation properly."

"What do you mean sir?" Kirkpatrick asked, already aware that he would most likely be heading up the Aerospace Fighter Project given his expertise and experience with both the F-22 and the F-35 and yet also aware that there would probably still be some protests regardless of his knowledge and experience.

"Have you ever met President Ryan before?" Stevens asked rhetorically, knowing that the engineer had not. "I have and I am pretty good friends with Vice President Jackson. President Ryan is a patriot and man of high character. However, he is also a pragmatist. He knows very well that no one country on this planet can hope to not only successfully defend Earth but also allow us to take our rightful position of power and respect in this universe we now find ourselves in. Ryan's declaration regarding the CSN and GDI are proof enough of his feelings on the matter. By showing him a united front we will gain a great and powerful ally in the CSN and GDI and I do not doubt for an instance that he will be able to get many of the other major powers to go along with his ideas. It is rare to see a leader who is so respected by the not only his allies but by his enemies as well. Well...what few enemies of his actually remain."

Knowing that his boss referred to the past destruction of many of the rogue elements that had risen up in attempts to upset peace and order and how under President Ryan many of these threats had been judiciously put down, Brian remarked, "You make it sound as if he

could potentially take over and become king if he wanted too."

"Ha!" Stevens laughed loudly, drawing only cursorily glances as many of those present were engaged in their own conversations and telling each other stories and jokes. "Jack Ryan is beloved and respected by the majority of the people of this country and the world over, but having him take on such a position would be completely against his character. No, if anything he will most likely be selected as the first Chief Executive of the CSN, whenever the politicians get around to deciding such matters. Old Jack Ryan is the living breathing epitome of democratic and republican ideas. Heh, if I was a man who believed in reincarnation I'd almost say that he is the second coming of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy all rolled into one."

"From you lips to God's ear, Sir," Kirkpatrick noted as he too greatly respected President Ryan and fervently believed that the man would be the key to leading not only America, but Earth as a whole into a brighter future.

**Lockheed Martin UK, Manning House
London, United Kingdom
Sol III, Grantville Cluster
25th January 2007/3022**

Those assembled in the conference room which could comfortably seat fifty people heard the approach of their most important attendee well before they saw his massive frame enter the room. This was due to the thump of a prosthetic leg, which ended in a square, rubber-coated band, hitting the meticulously polished floor of the corridor outside. The bearded man, who was starting to go grey around his temples, was dressed in a custom made suit to accommodate the titanium prosthetic that served as his lower left leg. He hobbled in and nodded in greeting to all those in the room, the low din of chatter between the attendees died away immediately. The man came to stop beside the lectern and placed his notes on it, also opening a laptop which had been placed there earlier. The digital projector mounted from the ceiling came to life and after warming up properly showed the laptop's screen greatly enlarged.

"Good morning, my name is Oliver Wendell Tyler; you all can call me Skip from now on, because we're going to become very familiar with one another over the next decade or so. Most of you know who I am; those who don't should've read the damn pre-briefing memos. We don't have time to dick around playing the name game, so I'll get right into it." Skip tapped a few keys on the laptop, and the room was treated to rotating wire diagrams of various warships.

"As you know, we now have floating above us two large Star League era Shipyards and four smaller ones, plus the orbital factory to support them. Hooked up to this, after making appropriate backups, we have a Fleet Yard database core. You're all looking at a small taste of what is inside this core." Skip gestured to the large screen. The faces in the room looked eager, fascinated, drinking in the sight of the warships. "We will not be building *any* of them..."

A din erupted; *'What?' 'You're kidding!' 'Why?' 'Skip? What the f...'*

Skip being the large guy he was, easily overpowered the noise and

bellowed, "...as they *are*!" His glare promised unpleasant consequences and the room quieted again. "Of the designs for warships that the Star League used over the centuries and those the Clans will develop in the future (if the sourcebooks can be totally trusted) I can, with a few notable exceptions, state that all of them are...badly designed, over and under-engineered pieces of crap that will roll out of our new shipyards over my dead body."

Skip saw the looks of doubt, but he had prepared for this. Many of the men and women before him had what was being termed '*BTech fever*'. With the gold mine of technologies, knowledge and resources Columbus Expedition had returned with, the Defence contractors of the world had turned into the equivalent of ravenous piranhas to get their hands on the SL data and technical specifications. It also meant that the people who had to use it, thought they were looking at holy writ of '*how it should be done*'. While that was true in the basic sense, it would be colossally stupid to assume that the final product had to resemble what was done before.

He tapped his laptop to show the next slide. "This is the *Texas* Class made by Krester Ship Construction. I've never seen something this ugly with the label 'ship' attached to it. Its design makes no sense at all, in both construction efficiency and the functions it performs. It's like the designers started building with two mindsets at once; the front half of the ship based on square geometries, the rear on a cylinder design which juts upward at an angle. There is no unified hull architecture to speak of even among ships that are supposed to fulfil the same roles. Now this is mostly due to the fact that these classes were manufactured by entirely different companies over the course of centuries, but it's hard to imagine after all this time that no school of thought had developed on what would be an efficient Destroyer, Cruiser or Battleship."

A man from RKK Energiya raised a hand. "This is the Star League we are talking about; surely they have something in terms of design to offer us."

"There are two Star League classes, and three designs from the future Clan, FedCom and Free Worlds League that has merit, but please keep in mind that...these are *Star League* or *League-based* designs; a

government that had raw materials and resources available to it on a scale that is difficult to get ones head around. We have one planet and a single asteroid mine that is perhaps six months away from yielding any raw materials. Solar prospecting is ongoing but once that Mobile Tunnel Miner design is copied, adapted to our needs and suitable ore locations found, only then will we be able to really start laying down hulls."

"Anyway, the five designs you should focus your attention on are..." Skip switched to the next slide, "the *Potemkin* troop carrier." It was a massive one thousand five hundred meter long cylindrical ship which only slightly flared out on the rear near the Fusion Torch engines. "This ship holds the record for most dropship docking collars mounted on a single hull, twenty five, arranged in rings in centre section, its armament consists of sixteen Naval Lasers, eight Barracuda launchers for anti-ASF duty, and twenty four Heavy Naval PPCs. It's mass...*one million five hundred thousand tons.*"

The screen now showed another slide. Skip's mouth twitched in amusement. "Then we have the *Fox* class Corvette, due to be fielded in 3058 by the future FedCom and manufactured by Federated-Boeing Interstellar."

Most of the faces in the room turned sour at the mere mention of the company that had won the contract to operate the Mech plant on Antallos with BMW. Most of those in the room wouldn't ever forget losing that hard fought contract bid.

Skip pointedly avoided commenting on that can of worms and continued. "The *Fox* class is a good and practical design, which is a deadly threat to anything short of another warship, and it will punch way above its weight class after we give it a nuclear makeover. The Lithium Fusion Batteries also give it the jump-in, blow the shit out of it, jump-out option, which makes it a very attractive design for a First Strike battle scenario."

The screen changed again, another cylindrical ship roughly eight hundred meters long, but more organic in look and rounded features. "The *Carrack* class, in the Star League it served originally as an armed Merchant transport to run the dangerous Periphery trade routes. It

also mounted an LF battery to get it out of dodge should it be ambushed. We armour it up properly, and give it the armament of the..." the projector screen now showed another ship, much more angular in design and a list of weaponry; 12x NAC/20s, 6 x NL45s, 8 x *Medium NPPCs*, 2 x *Killer Whale Missile Launchers*, 4 x *Barracuda Missile Launchers*. "...*Sovetskii Soyuz* class and we've got a proper escort for our *Potemkin*. Not to mention a Heavy Cruiser medium combatant instead of just a decently armed Merchant ship."

"Then the sole Clan design of merit, the *Conqueror* class. As you can see it has a number of rather ridiculous elements considering it flies in space. The exposed bridge tower on top of the large aft section is the first thing I'd target when attacking it and there's no possibility of gravity for the command crew unless the ship is under acceleration. Then the fore prow is..." Skip sighed as words failed him. "I'd like to ask what the designers were thinking...in fact I'm making it a rule from now on, anyone sends me a ship design with a prow, and you're out of this joint-venture, period." Everyone exchanged nervous looks.

"To get back to the *Conqueror*...its redeeming features to take note of are its high percentage of Naval Autocannons in comparison to its energy weaponry, this is to keep waste heat low. The *Conqueror* was originally based on the *Kimagure* class Star League pursuit cruiser, so using that we have a basis to work from. Its failing however was poor heat management; it only had enough heat sinks to fire a broadside at a single target at once. If the enemy attacked from multiple arcs... well the *Kimagure* saw its ass if that happened. To change that we need install Double Heat Sinks."

"We can't yet build DHS, but I'm hopeful the instructions found in the fleetyard core will be enough to change that. In any case, so keep your designs for the moment focused on mounting a higher percentage of ballistic weaponry. The *Conqueror* can also carry a large amount of ASFs, is extremely manoeuvrable, carries heavy armor, and has devastating firepower. Another ship to think about as an ASF Carrier is the *Thera* class, which will be introduced by Free Worlds League in 3060. Its shape is also more in line with what you should model on and it carries four full ASF regiments, my only complaint about it is that it's significantly slower in comparison to the *Conqueror*."

A Lockheed Martin rep asked. "I notice these ships, except for the Conqueror; all have a submarine-look to them. Coincidence, Skip?"

The former USN submariner frowned severely. "It just so happens that a cylindrical hull for a sub is something we know very well how to build Harold, since we've been doing it effectively since the late nineteenth century." The Northrop Grumman Newport News group nodded emphatically in agreement. "Now that you know what to look at, you have to keep in mind the GDI space combat doctrine."

Everyone in the room perked up at hearing that. A lot of people, which included rabid BT fans, scientists, academics, to your average Joe on the street, had flooded the public GDI internet server with suggestions of how to defend Earth and its ever expanding interests. The Doctrine was eventually going to be self-evident but GDI had kept it well under wraps. One of the reasons this meeting was so relatively small was the Top Secret clearance procedures and each attendee signing an NDA that, if violated, pretty much put you in solitary confinement for the rest of your life.

"The GDI has asked for what is tentatively termed a Deep Space Carrier, which will deploy our Monitor craft as the main combatant against enemy Warships, with aerospace fighters from our own 'Conqueror/Thera class' providing escort and combat protection. Our job is also to streamline the design of the Monitors that are currently patrolling Sol into a proper production model that isn't an ugly kludge held together with spit, bubblegum and duct tape. These things need to be able to fit into our Carrier and allow crews to work on them. They need to fire nuclear missiles when the shit has really hit the fan, they need to smash an enemy with Autocannon and PPCs, and they need to be able to take out incoming missiles and enemy ASFs."

"The Space Carrier represents a significant strategic investment in resources and manpower, so it needs as much protection as we can give it. Therefore, we need our own versions of the *Conqueror/Thera*, *Carrack* and *Fox* classes to give that protection."

A hand went up belonging to an engineer from CASC. "What about

our own design of ASF?"

Skip shook his head. "The team at Headquarters in Maryland will be handling that, our new Dropship class and we will also need to work with them on the Monitor design as well."

The meeting continued in a similar vein, with the discussion delving into the administrative minutia of the Joint Venture. Skip adjourned the meeting after another two hours of Q and A in that respect.

"All right everyone, you will be leaving with secure flash drives carrying the data you need to do your CAD modelling, you have one week from today to give me some bare bones designs. We will then constructively critique them; you will go back and make your improvements afterwards. In the end, I want to present GDI with ship designs so perfect they'll have no suggested changes to offer. I also want to finally impress upon you the gravity of the job ahead of us."

"Upon the ships we design in the next few weeks and build in the coming years rests the future of our children and theirs, the fate of our planet, heck, and the fate of the entire Inner Sphere. I'm a father of six children..." Skip glared meaningfully at the group, "...get it right."

On that note Director Oliver 'Skip' Tyler dismissed the first formal meeting of the Joint Space Alliance Company – Warship Division.

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Skip shut down the laptop, all the while eyeing the only remaining person in the room. He had been standing at the back calmly observing everything but not interfering, Skip hadn't expected him to either. "So what do you think, Captain Kamarov?"

Captain 2nd Rank Pyotr Kamarov dressed impeccably in his black Russian Navy Uniform adorned with the gold GDI Eagle pinned above the two rows of 'salad bars' he had earned in his career stepped forward and nodded, his Baltic features set in a cool mask. "It was an adequate briefing, Director. It remains to be seen if we will get any worthwhile designs."

"Well, I'm sure that a few of them will force me to shove my left leg up their asses, before they'll wake up and realize that we can't build most of the ships they hold dear to their hearts from the various sci-fi universes."

Kamarov looked hesitant, which was a strange look on the normally cool Russian officer. In the few weeks Skip had known him; he hadn't seen the man crack a smile once. "I have heard an interesting...I believe the American term is 'scuttlebutt', Director."

"Oh?"

"That it is possible that Navy submarines will be deployed on other worlds in the future."

"Captain, it's definitely a future possibility. Where did you hear this?"

"A Captain from the British SBS mentioned it to me."

Skip smirked knowingly. "Let me guess, Captain Spiers."

Kamarov nodded. "How did you know, Director?"

Skip snorted in amusement. "Let's just say that the good Captain has been rather enthusiastic about his idea. He probably heard of your appointment as my liaison and decided to encourage me further in a roundabout way. Well, he needn't have bothered I've already decided to cut my teeth on this as my own project while the rest of JSAC is busy with the warship design; it'll keep me busy until I put the final stamp of approval on the designs and we eventually head up to the shipyards."

Kamarov was almost hopeful as he asked. "Do you mind sharing what you have so far, Director?"

"Not at all, we build a special Dropship that is able to land on water, using inflatable buoyancy systems; it then turns itself into a tiny harbour, before launching an SSN. We'll make it look like a Mule class on the outside to keep it from being spotted as out of the

ordinary, also put in a lot more guns and armour for protection, essentially turning it into a Q-ship. There's a few protocols to work out as well on securing the sub for interstellar travel; for instance you need a supplemental water cooling system to keep the reactor at a manageable temp, power hook-ups from the Dropship to the sub and probably a few others I haven't thought of yet...we will need to experiment with one of the retired 688s before we even think of putting a *Seawolf*, *Akula* or any other on a space voyage."

"Indeed," Kamarov looked somewhat relieved. "It's good to know that in this new age we seamen will continue to have a place."

Skip nodded emphatically. "Oh yes, Captain, don't doubt that. In fact, I think in the future we sub drivers will make a *big* difference."

Low Orbit, Antallos

29th January 2007

The *Mule* Class GDI Dropship orientated itself to initiate a de-orbit burn from its fusion engines. The egg shaped vessel rocked as the engines ignited, and less than a minute later, having shed most of its orbital velocity; it began the descent to Port Krin's Spaceport. It was part of the standard run from the Command Circuit between Earth and Antallos and it was hardly unusual. It carried supplies and men for the GDI presence on the planet; however, on this trip inserted into the normalcy was the decidedly unusual. No one besides the Captain knew that the Dropship was actually running with two more passengers than officially listed and their respective equipment, and even he only knew enough not to ask questions that were way over his paygrade or clearance. When someone waved *those* credentials, he knew to just shut up and not even dream of the existence of the two passengers in question. He gave them their berth in an out of the way part of the Dropship as he could find, showed them where the escape pods were, especially the functional launch tube that lacked a pod, and got on with the business of captaining the ship.

The Dropship was well into the atmosphere now, riding a bright pillar of fusion flame that lit the night to slow its vertical velocity to landing parameters. As it passed from the mesosphere level into the stratosphere, the larger of the two 'classified' passengers, fully outfitted for his journey and objectives, climbed into the empty Launch tube. His fair companion had already interfaced her laptop into the tube systems and had overridden its command circuitry, preventing the Bridge from registering the tube opening at all.

He pulled the aviator mask that had been feeding him pure oxygen for the past half an hour away from his face. "Mind if I step outside a while Grim?"

Anna Grimsdóttir smirked at her partner. "Not at all, Sam." She triggered the inner hatch shut and put on her well worn earphones and integrated microphone, powering up all the encrypted digital com gear. "You read me?"

"Clear as crystal, Grim."

She turned to her laptop and brought up the ship status feed she had hacked into. It had been laughably easy and the NSA cryptographer wondered that if this was the state of Inner Sphere IT, then Third Echelon would have a much easier time squeezing itself into places it didn't belong out here in the greater Galaxy. 'What wonders never cease' she mused. Here she and Sam were, slightly under *two hundred light years* from Earth, running a Splinter Cell op.

"Altitude forty-two k."

It had been a thankfully short trip thanks to the Command circuit, Anna couldn't and didn't want to imagine what it must have been like for the GDI Expeditionary force. She was very much a city girl, born in Boston, and grew up around computers and puzzles, being cooped up in the closet that masqueraded as a room on board the Dropship was not her idea of a good time.

"Thirty-one k, stand by." Her hand waited over the rather large red button, the manual launch – which would open the outer hatch and waited calmly for the ship's altimeter to read twenty seven kilometers and pushed.

Sam Fischer, his helmet closed and oxygen systems feeding him properly heated and pressurized air; was ejected into the low stratosphere of Antallos. He overcame the initial disorientation from the acceleration and using the military free-fall boots and his arms, expertly righted himself to begin falling in the classic 'arch' or 'belly to the earth' free fall position. For a few brief moments he stayed level with the descending spheroid dropship, but its rapid deceleration and his rapid acceleration towards the ground soon meant that he was leaving it behind. He moved his body much like a plane would to pull away...getting cooked by the fusion plume of a dropship was not his idea of a good death.

His sub cochlear radio earpiece crackled and Anna's voice transmitted itself directly into his eardrums. *'Nice view out there, Sam?'*

"Picturesque," was his wry reply. The very odd star field shining

down upon the expanding spider web lines of Port Krin's artificial lighting would make a nice background wallpaper on his office computer in Third Echelon.

'Huh, you get the fun old man, whilst I get the ride in what feels like a glorified interstellar gimbal machine.'

Sam chuckled and looked at his wrist altimeter. So far so good, his midnight black Mark V Tactical Operations Suit was keeping him nice and warm despite the subzero ambient temperatures around him, thanks to its thermoregulation system, and he was arcing his trajectory carefully over towards his general destination. He was probably being detected by GDI radar, but the stealth properties of his suit made the radar return well below the detection threshold programming that cancelled out birds from showing up on the screens. So at least, the DARPA liaison theorized.

"Approaching parafoil deployment altitude."

The planet below had swollen considerably to dominate his vision, and he was no longer able to see its curvature. He adjusted his free-fall to now enter the more dangerous 'head-to-earth' position, his freefall rate increasing from 190 kilometers per hour to over 257. All his concentration had to go now into being absolutely stable and orientated; as such he now had to rely on his AAD (Auto Activation Device) to unfurl the parafoil. In his head he counted down his best mental estimate of when the AAD would activate...if it didn't, he would have to pull back into 'arch' and deploy his reserve chute...this would increase his profile and he'd definitely be flagged by Radar as 'suspect'. GDI would investigate and then this 'blacker than black op' would be forced into the 'official' spotlight.

In the end, his count was only two seconds off. At exactly eight thousand two hundred meters, the parafoil struts were unfurled, and the radar absorbent surfaces locked in place between them, forming a wing that in effect turned him into a human glider. With it came enough stability that let him move his arms freely again, into the control handles under either side of the wing. Carefully he twisted... turning the small flaps to correct his dive.

He had used the Switchblade parafoil once before, it had worked then, and DARPA's ingenuity didn't fail him now...thank goodness. The thing was still technically in testing.

He had arrested his fall, but still had way too much speed and moved into an S-turn to bleed some of it off. Looking to his left, the arm which held his OPSAT – which had been reprogrammed to work on inertial guidance – he saw that his target was dead ahead, about nine kilometers distant. He'd make that easily.

"On target, Grim."

"Good, I'd really have preferred we used the GDI spysat in orbit, but we'll have to learn to make do without it if we're going to be doing this again in the Inner Sphere."

A minute of flight later Sam spotted his target in the night. The starlight and the buildings' own lighting reflecting off its sloping, curved lines, and the unmistakable large dish that represented the business end of a Hyperpulse Generator on top.

"Time to get to work."

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Sam Fisher crouched on the roof of the Comstar HPG station, using the shadow cast by the large antenna dish to remain unseen from any possible observers from the ground, whilst he refolded the parafoil and placed all the HAHO jump gear with it; all of which had been designed with this in mind. It all fit into a duffel bag that was as dark as his own Tactical suit, and he would leave it here for the duration of the mission, retrieving it on his way out...if things didn't pan out and he was forced to use another exfiltration point, Anna could send a remote command to the duffel bag itself to detonate incendiary charges that were inserted in the linings – Comstar would find nothing but a misshapen lump of scorched black plastics and steel.

With that done he eyed the nearby cracked skylight; apparently damaged by the adjacent HPG dish at some point in the past. A feel of the dish mounting base revealed repair welds. *'Guess some it must*

have been blasted off in the past.' Sam carefully began pulling away the cracked sections of glass out of its housing.

He attached a rope around the base of the HPG dish and threaded it into his harness. The lobby below was darkened with minimal lighting. He gave an exaggerated nod to drop his trifocal vision goggles, observing the room in the green hues of low-light Vision. There was not a soul in sight from his vantage point but he spotted a fixed camera facing directly towards the public entrance, which also covered much of the room.

This wasn't good enough so he carefully pushed down his fiber-optic camera – twisting it to do a more thorough sweep...and revealed a Comstar Acolyte seated in a far corner, fast asleep. *'He's not even patrolling.'* Sam thought derisively. There could be no evidence of any break-in, so it limited his means for proceeding somewhat but it wasn't insurmountable.

He unslung the SC-20K. It was essentially a highly modified, 30-round, selective fire 5.56x45mm NATO bullpup assault rifle with a suppressor, a 1.5x reflex sight or a 2/4/6x scope, and had an underslung grenade launcher used to launch various less-than-lethal devices. He loaded one such device and carefully aimed at the camera, the weapon barely made a sound as it sent an EMP round to put it out of action.

He quickly looked into the fibre-op cam...the Acolyte was still asleep.

Moments later he had silently rappelled down into the lobby. He unhooked the rope and with a tiny remote, the Ascender he had attached at the base of the sat dish pulled the rope back up, but not completely, as it had to come back down for his exfiltration later.

Adopting a crouch, he walked carefully and efficiently forward, his soft, yet durable shoes preventing any sound from being made by his footfall on the plastic tile floor. He paused directly under the camera he had disabled earlier, and glanced at his watch. The small EMP device that had been stuck there fell right on time, and he easily snatched it out of the air. *'Score another one for DARPA.'*

He moved out of the lobby and into the main corridor, there were thankfully no lights here or cameras, but he froze when he saw what looked like laser emitters near the floor. Switching to thermal vision on his goggles, he noted that they weren't active. *"Very sloppy or it's just broken down."*

Back to infrared vision, he continued forward and leaned against a corner, surveying the turn in corridor ahead before proceeding. The area ahead was fully lighted; there were two elevators, another Acolyte – this one looking half-awake and visibly struggling to remain so – and another camera.

Sam carefully removed his SC pistol, also from Fabrique National; the highly modified Five Seven with an attached suppressor fired twenty rounds of NATO 5.7mm ammunition. He was not allowed to kill anybody today, so it was filled with the most potent tranquilizer ammo that Third Echelon had access to. Presenting as little of the weapon around the corner as possible, he fired a dart directly into the Acolyte' neck. *'Good night sweetheart.'*

He changed ammo at this point to fire a prototype device called an Optically Channeled Potentiator (OCP). They destroyed themselves on impact, unlike the EMP fired from his SC20, and were used to temporarily disrupt electronic devices, such as light fixtures, gun turrets and security cameras.

With the thirty seconds time he had; Sam rushed forward, removed the dart from the Acolyte, pressed both buttons on the elevators – his luck held out, one opened immediately; quickly glanced inside – no cameras and then pushed out the ceiling to find the access hatch, whilst thumbing the 'Door Close' button.

He made it into the elevator shaft with three seconds to spare.

'So far so good, Sam.' Grim praised. *'Precentor Long's office should be on the fifth floor and thermal imaging has shown the station mainframe on the third.'*

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Despite the fact that it was the middle of the night, the upper floors had more activity from the Acolytes and Adepts that called the Antallos HPG home. On the third floor Sam had to wait for a bored looking Adept to pass the elevator door, before he could push it open fully. The minimal lighting that the station kept itself under (to spare the lights and extend their life as much as possible probably) gave him a rather easy time of it to advance forward. At one point an Acolyte passed within three feet of him, and didn't so much as suspect he was there – he might as well have been invisible.

There were more cameras on this level, some of which he didn't even need to worry about because they had been gutted for parts. It was obvious that Antallos hadn't been really that much of a priority for Comstar – which was due to change in a hurry no doubt, thanks to GDI's presence. It was one of the reasons Third Echelon wanted the mission to happen now, as opposed to when (according analysts referencing from the Sourcebooks) the Antallos HPG would likely be upgraded to a higher priority station.

The din of the large mainframes cooling fans resonated throughout the level and he crouched just beside a door to a room that was the hottest he had seen so far, thanks to his own thermal vision. Taking out his fibre-op cam, he threaded it through the gap. The room beyond was almost ten meters in length and about six in width, on either side were two near continuous lengths of BT style computer mainframes, with integrated workstations, display screens and flashing lights spanning that length.

A single Adept was at one station, staring fixedly at the screen whilst tapping the keyboard under it. The room was fully lit – this was not going to be easy at all. Sam drew his pistol, and shot out the closest light to his left to create more darkness. The OCP round did its job permanently this time. He changed ammo to tranq darts and after checking no one was approaching in the hall, thumbed the door control directly above his head.

The doors hissed open on their servos. The light from the Mainframe room cut most of the darkness away, except for a patch on the opposite side of the hall, where Sam was now crouched.

"Hello?"

Sam obviously didn't respond. He took aim and waited.

The Adept's tone was now irritated. "Helloooo?"

Finally, there were footsteps and the red-robed Adept was framed in the doorway, his light adapted eyes might as well have been staring into a black hole – there was no way he could see Sam waiting for him.

The pistol gave a muted cough and the Adept gasped, clutching at his throat, and he simply slumped into a heap on the floor. Sam rushed forward thumbing the inner door controls to slide shut. He eyed the Adept, a man with hazel hair...perhaps in his late twenties. Picking him up was easy.

Sam deposited the unfortunate Adept in front of the workstation he had been using and pulled out the dart in his neck. He wasn't worried about the man remembering anything about this experience...since Third Echelon's tranq dart cocktail included Flunitrazepam. Sam scowled as he thought of the uses which other SOBs back on Earth used it for.

He posed the Adept to make it seem like he had simply fallen asleep at his station, and scanned the length of the mainframe for what he was looking for. He found it two thirds of the way along its length.

He carefully pulled off the panel. "Grim, I've found the interface port."

'Good, the Dropship has landed by the way.'

He pulled out the cord that had been specially interfaced with his radio system, and plugged into the computer socket that was common to BT IT systems.

"You getting anything?"

"Yeah, but signal strength is mid range, it's all the EM emission from

the mainframe...beginning Hydra worm upload...I'm getting five hundred kbps. Fifty seconds till upload completion."

Sam aimed his pistol at the door and the familiar anxiousness of having to wait in a critical situation reared its familiar unwelcome head. The whole mission could go Fubar in the next minute, because he was now in essence tied to the damn mainframe until the worm upload was done.

"Twenty seconds..."

The din of the mainframe kept him from being able to hear any footsteps from the corridor as well.

"Ten seconds..."

"Five..."

"Four..."

"Three..."

"Two..."

"One...upload is done."

Sam pulled out the cable and its autowind mechanism pulled it back in so it was out of his way. He hurried to the door and surveyed the corridor with the fibre-op cam. His heart hammered in his chest as he saw of all people, Precentor Long walking past, in his pajamas and yawning as he went, a sandwich in his hand.

'Going for a damn midnight snack.' Sam thought in irritation.

When the Head of the Antallos HPG was out of sight, Sam got out of the Mainframe room and back into the shadows of the main third floor corridor. He breathed an inward sigh of relief. He had played heavy stakes before, where the lives of millions and the survival of his country rode on his actions...but here and now, it was the survival of every person that lived on Earth.

He moved back towards the elevators and once again into the shafts.

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The fifth floor held the Precentor's office and seemed to be devoted to archival storage; and it was a far cry from the massive server farms of the NSA, a good percentage of it was still hardcopy file cabinets. Not that NSA or Third Echelon had done away with hardcopy formats either; the Agency had to be somewhat immune to a 'Doomsday scenario' after all; if the use of electronics and technology were disrupted for any length of time. It seemed though that Comstar had taken that idea much further.

'It's somewhat nostalgic,' Grim commented as he moved through a room lined with ceiling high file cabinets. "It's like walking through early NSA or even the OSS. I guess the Succession Wars taught them to back up their data in multiple formats."

While there was a lot here that Third Echelon would like to get their hands on, there was too much chance there were passive protections on the cabinets; something as simple as a thin strand of hair or thread stuck to the inside of a drawer. In any case, that was not Sam's objective. While they knew Precentor Long's office was on this floor, they didn't know its exact location. As such he was busy with a systematic survey of every room. It was a frustrating process, as camera coverage on this floor was much better, and it ran down his OCP ammo.

Sam was thankful eventually for human hubris; as 'Precentor Long' was written in nice bold lettering to the side of the door in the north-east corner of the floor. Access to this office was the first proper security setup he'd seen in the HPG station; numeric keypad, retinal biometric scanner, with a camera watching over anyone who tried to access it.

He was crouched in the darkness on the opposite side of the corridor, outside the camera's field of view and mentally rehearsed his actions. Taking a deep breath he aimed his pistol and fired.

30 seconds...

He rushed forward as fast as he dared, pulled out his fibre-op cam and snaked it under the door.

25 seconds...

"Triangulate my position now, Grim."

'Copy that.'

21 seconds...

He carefully did a slow right to left pan, surveying the office. Sam first impression was that it looked somewhat like a lawyer's office; one entire wall was dominated by a bookshelf neatly arranged with volumes and not an inch wasted or unused. On a steel desk that was painted an off white, was a BT standard computer 'desktop' and stacks of neatly arranged paperwork. Another wall held an artist's rendition of Terra and a massive starmap of the Inner Sphere, with the various Successor State territories colored in.

16 seconds...

He found his objective on the far wall behind the desk.

'I've got your exact X,Y,Z coordinates Sam. Does his office have what we need?'

"Oh yes, like any man at the top, the Precentor likes to have a room with a view."

'Good, now get out of there.'

9 seconds...

Sam pulled back the fibre-op cam and moved out of view and back into the darkness. "I've found another exfil point in the elevator shaft that I can access with a bit of rewiring, it'll lead me onto the roof and I can retrieve my gear from there."

'Now we don't have to worry about your low OCP ammo.'

"I'll see you at the rendezvous."

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Port Krin, Antallos
30th January 2007

Sam Fisher was now dressed in civilian clothes and used his high power binoculars to scan the HPG station just under a kilometer distant from apartment block that all the Boeing and BMW workers operating in the Combine-leased Mech factory would be using. He and Grim were sharing an apartment in the GDI secured building; their cover being that they were two survey engineers that had arrived from Earth to do a thorough inspection before declaring it safe for use.

He lowered the optics and walked away from the window to observe as Grim assembled the most ingenious surveillance device ever conceived in his own humble opinion.

She grinned at him, pushing her blonde hair out of the way, whilst screwing in the device to the tripod stand. "Done."

Sam picked the device up at the base of the tripod and brought it over to the window. He made sure it was stable and placed his eye onto the aiming optics, which gave him an extremely magnified view from the telephoto lens. He could see the HPG station gleaming in the sunlight and some of its Comstar personnel were outside it, within the perimeter fence...some studying from books, others just generally chatting with each other or having their breakfast outside.

He moved the device' crosshairs and panned up, scanning for their target... occasionally referencing from their calculations. "Got it, Grim." She nodded and sat down behind her laptop, and executed the programs needed.

"Ready...lase it, Sam."

He pushed down on the small red button.

An invisible Laser crossed the space between them and the reinforced window that lined the outer wall of Precentor Long's office. The beam penetrated into the office and bounced off the picture of Terra, where the smooth plastic that covered it reflected it straight back to the receiver within the Laser Microphone; the minute differences in the distance traveled by the light as it reflected from the vibrating painting (when anybody in the room spoke or did anything to create noise) would be detected.

Grim put on a pair of military earphones attached to her laptop, tapped a few buttons on her keyboard and grinned. "I have signal and sound."

Sam leaned away from the Laser Mike and folded his broad arms "Are we sure they don't have a counter for this surveillance method?" The NSA made use of Laser Microphones extensively, but they also knew how to defeat the technology if it was ever used against them; for example all the glass of the NSA building in Fort Meade, Maryland had rippled layers to provide as poor reflective surface as possible for a laser. Then there were also the specialized light sensors in every office with a window which would sound an alert to a laser penetrating it.

"It's possible, but the analysts doubt it – it's lostech at the moment. Not to mention Antallos is as backwater as you can get, and it 'was' a nest for every scumbag, slaver and pirate on this side of the Inner Sphere. The HPG here is Class B only because of the business they brought. Even so, we can safely assume from your infiltration last night that they're very last on the list to get equipment sent here from Terra – I mean its *three and half months* in one direction with a dedicated Jumpship."

Sam's eyebrows raised in appreciation. "That logistics is a nightmare. Except for his office...the Precentor probably got his security tech locally, never mind the state of the art stuff from Terra."

"Exactly. I think we'll probably find much the same situation on Enif

and Dneiper."

"It's too bad it won't last."

Grim smiled ruefully. "Yeah, consensus is that with the splash GDI made here, that Antallos HPG will become Class A; that means a proper ROM contingent and much better security tech and procedures. We'll have to develop a plan for getting around that."

"That'll make things much more...*interesting*. Well then, let's listen to the typical day of Precentor Long, shall we?"

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**Oval Office, The White House
Washington DC
Sol III, Grantville Cluster
12th February 2007**

Jack Ryan stared out of the east facing windows that looked out onto the Rose Garden. He needed to take a break, but unfortunately the Galaxy would not allow that; since the GDI expansion onto Antallos and the return of Operation Phantom Snowflake, not to mention organizing another expedition to begin a full retrieval operation...his workload had only gotten greater...on top dealing with the domestic issues. Yes, he technically shared this load with all the other CSN states, but it didn't seem like it.

His desk intercom beeped. "Mr. President, you have a call from the NSA on Line 3."

Jack walked over to his phone. "This is Ryan."

"Mr. President, I just wish to inform you that 'Operation: Crusher' is a go."

"Good, carry on Mr Lambert."

"Thank you, sir." The line went dead.

Past presidents had not bothered with the nitty-gritty of the spy

trade. Jack was not like those past presidents, having been in the spy trade himself, and he was most certainly not a 'career' politician. He wondered if he should propose a bill to affect the latter into law.

**Seattle, Washington State,
United States, Earth,
Coalition of Sovereign Nations
12 April 2007/3022**

Before the expectant crown of officials, reporters, cameras, and random onlookers, the doors of the great hangar parted. Rolling out of the hangar into the bright sun came the latest in Earth engineering. It had been named the *Pioneer* and it was the latest thing in spaceflight, a product of nearly two years of design and redesign as new technology became available. Finally, it was ready for the public eye.

To the disappointment of some, the *Pioneer* looked very much like the old, retired Space Shuttles. Like the old Shuttles, this new spacecraft had a boxy, blunt-nosed fuselage, as well as the doors on upper side of said fuselage. But there were some differences a discerning eye could make out, such as the seam running around the nose suggesting yet another cargo door, the single large exhaust on its rear compared to the original's three, and the air intakes flanking the fuselage above the wings. The wings themselves were not a solid piece, but obviously designed to swivel wide for more lift. And any chance of mistaking the *Pioneer* for an old Shuttle was terminated by one of the actual Shuttles sitting on the tarmac nearby; the new version was visibly much larger than its ancestor as it rolled past. Minus its wings and tail, the old Shuttle looked like it could have been fitted into the *Pioneer's* cargo bay with room to spare.

Pioneer continued to roll, taxiing past the crowd and onto a runway. As it did, a man from Boeing explained exactly what the *Pioneer* was. It wasn't a military attack ship as some had speculated. Its skin was far too thin for that, not even using the still expensive BT standard armor except in the most limited amounts necessary for atmospheric entry. It was also entirely unarmed, although its one thousand ton rated cargo bay could be outfitted with missile launchers in an emergency. *Pioneer* was also not a Dropship, lacking the expensive KF boom structure required for surviving interstellar jumps.

In truth, the *Pioneer* was the first pure civilian spacecraft made by

Earth. It was intended to support the growing space-based industries throughout the Solar System. As such, it was little more than a fusion engine, life support sections, and a massive cargo bay all in a box and all made as cheaply as possible.

But the real significance of *Pioneer* was in its fusion engine. By BT standards, it was overweight, underpowered, and a fuel hog. But then again, unlike every other fusion engine that Earth and the CSN were currently using, no BT manufacturer had made this engine. This engine had not been salvaged from a wreck, confiscated from pirates, or bought from another world. The *Pioneer* was in fact using the first fusion engine ever constructed by Earth, and construction of the factories to mass produce more such engines were already under way. And once fusion engines could be produced en masse, the wealth and resources of the entire solar system would finally be open to everyone as privately owned spaceflight would then become a reality.

The *Pioneer's* wings spread wide, and its main engine roared to shoot it down the runway. As it neared the end, its nose lifted up and *Pioneer* lifted into the air to the cheers of the crowd. And the nose continued to angle up as the prototype craft reached for space. Presently, its engine was taking in the external air and using it for reaction mass. But once the air became too thin for that to be effective, it would switch over to its internal fuel supply.

As the *Pioneer* all but vanished into the distance – its fusion tail would be visible for some time yet if not the ship itself – a reporter asked the Boeing man what mass-produced fusion engines would mean for the military. Did GDI or any of the national militaries have plans for combat ships using the new fusion engines? The Boeing man's reply was short and to the point.

"No comment."

*Lockheed SkunkWorks
Nevada Test and Training Range
Nevada, United States of America
25th April 2007/3022*

Area 51

Slowly the hanger door slid open and from them emerged a sleek sliver shape. Reminiscent of the F22 in the nose, the delta winged prototype taxied onto the tarmac, the lower two of its four dart like tail stabilizers folded up to allow for clearance. While it was currently armed only with dummy weapons, the sun glittered off the two pods mounted into the wings while the larger mounting under the center made promises of the threat it would one day become.

The craft moved into a straight line and two jets of pure plasma, solar matter, were expelled from the rear like the fires of hell. Faster than any craft ever built on earth, the vehicle accelerated, pitching its nose up and taking to the air. With almost artistic simplicity the landing gear folded up and the lower two aft stabilizers folded down, completing its transformation from a awkward ground vehicle, to a sleek predator of the skies and opened its throttle.

With a earth shattering sonic boom, it was done. The MiG/Lockheed-Martin ASF-01 BearCat had officially translated from idea to reality. There was still much testing to be done, but Earth had officially taken the first tangible step to entering the Star-Fighter game.

From her place in the stands, Major Jane Ibrahim calmly smiled as sipped her mango drink, seemingly unaffected by the spontaneous celebration exploding around her. While for this this was a monumental occasion, for her it was just a moment of deeply set personal satisfaction.

For the past year she'd been a ranking advisor for this program, watching and helping as they developed it from nothing to what it was today. While it was not the most spectacular fighter in the Sphere she would admit, it really wasn't half bad. Armed to the teeth and armored like a tank, but with a trade off in speed. Easy to repair

and easy to modify, with superior electronics and stealth features that made it difficult to spot at range. Yes, if it lived up to its promises, it had all the makings of a good fighter.

Her smile grew. And as soon as they finished working out the bugs, she'd own one. The King of Saudi Arabia has promised her one of the first production run, to be powered by the engine of a Stinger her husband had destroyed in the Battle of Mecca as his gift of respect to a hero of the faith. Sure, it would never have the same deeply felt emotional attachment of her families late Sparrowhawk, but she was sure as hell not going to turn down a chance to fly as a warrior once again.

She leaned back and her smile grew once again as she kicked her feet up on the rail in front of her.

Which variant to take? She wondered. The first model mounted a simple, reliable Class Five Autocannon. The A model was slotted to mount a larger laser imported from the Outworlds Alliance and some additional Heatsinks to keep her cool. The B a PPC, if they could find a reliable supplier. Finally, there was the C, which was to mount a internal rotary missile launcher and 12 of their terrific new Thunderbolt Multi-Aspect Missiles.

"Ah," she said with a contented sigh. "Decisions, decisions."

January 10, 2007/3022

OHB selected for the construction of 20 modular multi-purpose satellites to be deployed on Antallos

Vice-President Antonio Tajani today announced that the CSN has selected the consortium led by OHB-System AG for building and testing 20 satellites for the Antallos SkyEye system, a program of and funded jointly by the Coalition of Sovereign Nations and Global Defense Initiative.

Berry Smutny, CEO of OHB-System AG, stated upon learning of the decision "We are very pleased and honoured with the Commission's decision. SkyEye is one of Earth's most important infrastructure export programs. We will start and do our industrial job once we're upgraded our factories; this is a big success for Bremen. We are very proud to serve this program along the road towards the creation of Antallos' own dedicated satellite system".

As a result of this decision, OHB-System will be assuming the role of prime contractor for the fabrication of the 20 satellites, including full responsibility for developing the satellite platform and overall integration of the satellites. The 20 satellites will be assembled in Bremen.

The SkyEye satellite system will be the first satellite built and designed to take advantage of the plentiful orbital lifting capacity, making weight savings a tertiary aim after EMP-hardening and multi-purpose functionality.

It consists of a modular system that will be able to host a wide range of payload modules up to ten metric tons, including TV and communication systems as well as RADAR, cameras or meteorological modules.

CSN ordered ten satellites for communications, traffic control and meteorology while GDI ordered another ten. The exact nature of their payload is not detailed, but they can use the same modules as the civilian satellites.

"We hope to sell those models to new founded colonies and are proud to be one of the first companies with a build to stock satellite production. The days of waiting for a start date are over, today's challenge is to be able to deliver high-quality systems to our customers in a very short time."

In the construction of the satellites, OHB will be able to harvest the many years of experience which they have amassed. Not least of all, OHB-System successfully built and launched the German SAR-Lupe radar reconnaissance system, a constellation of five satellites, on time and within budget.

OHB did bid for the new orbital nuclear platform but lost the contract to a consortium of EADS Astrium and Boeing Satellite Systems.

Port Krin Spaceport

Port Krin, Antallos

10 February 2007/3022

The door of the GDI dropship opened and five truck engines started. "Let's see Port Krin." Gefreiter Schulze said, driving his truck out of the first cargo-bay and transporting a transhospital container. Next to him sat Stabsarzt Koslowski, an actual doctor and officer, and while both of them belonged to the German Bundeswehr medical detachment, they had spoken English ever since leaving Earth to get used to it.

Led by a Canadian GDI jeep, the trucks painted with a bronze GDI eagle and transporting medical containers drove over the landing field and led for the crowded streets. "Looks like a mixture of 1001 nights and Heidelberg..." Koslowski commented, looking out of the window. "Well. And a fucking Airport."

"Interesting mixture, Sir." They were passing the first post and actually entered the narrow streets.

About half an hour later, a time which Koslowski used to point out he had read the briefing material soon becoming an actual tourist guide and pointing to every single construction site for schools, colleges, hospitals or religious buildings - there were a lot of them but Port Krin had more than a million inhabitants after all – they reached the first fence of the GDI base.

Tent cities had months ago been replaced by houses a lot better than the Antallos standard and there was a big influx of people wanting to help as well as dozens of construction sites, including several

churches, mosques and synagogues. The first schools had already opened, while a lot of others and colleges or free public libraries were still being built.

Port Krins Infrastructure already had improving dramatically and it would go on as the first permanent hospitals and homes for the disabled were going to be build.

The street in front of the base was literally besieged by people - patients, beggars and citizens looking for a chance to get a ticket to "Motherlode".

A cute brunette in a hot dress smiled to them and wanted to come nearer, but they were entering the camp at that moment.

Inside the base was a small city built from containers, passageways and tents. 100 of the Bundeswehrs 250 field hospital containers were placed here, and they were transporting another 25. The medical detachment was truly international, intermingled with members of Doctors without borders. There were shops and a post office, too. It was even more crowded. The only areas relatively clear of people were the CSN embassy and the construction sites for several churches - including what looked like a small monastery - mosques and synagogues.

After stopping the truck and leaving it, Schulze looked at the inner fence, which actually was guarded and was greeted by another German truck driver.

"I wonder what's behind that fence..."

"That? That's Motherlode sector."

"Hmm?"

"It's for 'Motherlodgers'." He lowered his voice "A cinema, a few shops with beer from home, McDonalds, ..."

"Ah, I see." Schulze grinned "The comforts of home without telling too much."

"Exactly. The innermost part is used by the actual troops. HQ, power

plant, housing..."

"Thanks mate. I'll buy you a beer, but now I have to go and fetch another container. Heck, they're unloading them insanely fast!"

Later that evening.

Schulze entered a bar in Motherlode Sector. It looked like a mixture of a cheap restaurant and bar that wouldn't look wrong on any city on Earth, too. It was filled with various Earth citizens of all ethnicities and military or civilian vocations - bureaucrats, construction workers, priests of very different religions, soldiers, technicians, medics and many more.

"Hi!"

He looked around and saw the truck driver he met earlier. "Hi, may I take a seat?"

"Sure, welcome to the base. My buddies will come later."

"Thanks. It's nice over here." he seated himself.

"Yeah, much better than on that ship, don't you think...?"

Schulze grabbed the menu "Definitely. Wow, that's good. Burgers, fries, Schnitzels, Pizza, ... Beer. I take a Pils, what about you?"

"The taste of home... They have a rotating menu in the staff canteen with a different national food and a fitting cook every week. Works very well. And the cook here is actually Franco-Italian. I'll take another Pils, thanks."

"Sounds good, very good... And what's that over there?" he pointed to a billboard that had attracted a sizable crowd.

"Oh, that's the movie schedule."

"Ah, what are they showing?"

"Well, people like 300. Just keeps running and running. But the most interesting thing on that schedule in the moment is the sports newscast. Football, that stuff the Americans call football, baseball, cricket... everything. I'll go to the cinema later and watch Bayern München vs. Borussia Dortmund."

"What, that game was..."

"Don't you dare!"

"Sorry. Seems like they do a lot to inform us about home... Just look at all those news magazines out there. TIME, Newsweek, Le Point, Maclean's, Die Zeit, Der Spiegel, The Week, Le Nouvel Observateur, Kommersant Vlast,...!"

"Yeah, that entire weekly stuff. There's even two 'weeks' - an Indian and an UK edition. We get infodumps from daily newspaper's websites into the internal net, too. We definitely can't complain about missing news over here. No Earth news may leave the sector, that's one of the reasons it's that popular. The only periodical allowed outside the base is the Antallos Gazette."

"There's even a local newspaper in here?"

"Yes, it's written both for us and the locals to inform about changes on the city and its surroundings. There are spheroid reporters out there, of course, but this is written by some of our new local bureaucrats that at least have a hint of both worlds and a few 'local' Earthlings that write the 'classified' Earthling-only-part. If you leave the base, be prepared to be interviewed. They like to pick on newcomers. Be especially careful towards a Lois Lane, she already got some good coverage..."

"A reporter called Lois Lane? You got to be kidding me!"

Shushō Kantei Building
Tokyo, Japan
April 13, 2007/3022

Japan was an economic power, not a military one. Though it was (seventh) in the world in terms of military spending, its total forces remained too few to realistically defend all of its islands. Power rested on the corporations, who saw their commerce as the lifeblood of the nation. A few years back, a businessman named Raizo Yamata manipulated the corporation chiefs, helped put a lecherous and corrupt politician (Goto) into office as Prime Minister, handled the acquisition of ICBM technology from the Russians and the secret construction of launching sites, opened up the conspiracy with India and China, and forced the nation into a state of war against America. This was all to repay a 'Debt of Honor' from his parent's suicide death in Saipan during World War 2.

Yamata stoked fears about a trade war, or blocking Japanese products from American markets, as an attack against their economy. If they could not depend upon the American market for their resources, then they needed to secure it from other sources. In the conspiracy between China, India and Japan to gain access to the 'Northern Resource Area', the newly-discovered massive reserves of Siberian gold and oil, Japan made the first aggressive move and prepared for the retaliation.

Not unexpectedly, instead of Japan gaining respect as a global power with its own nuclear arsenal, this aggression only made them lose 'face'. At the end of it, not only had Japan lost its secret store of nuclear ICBMs, but the global stock market had systematically collapsed the yen in the exact same manner that they had hoped to destroy the dollar.

The Prime Minister before that was Mogataru Koga, and he took back the office to end the insanity. He, along with the nation, still had a long way to go on the road to recovery from Goto's inept handling of the situation.

He stared out at the garden of the Kantei building, the Prime

Minister's official workplace. He could see part of the National Diet Building, and again it struck him how little power the government itself seemed to have compared to the corporations.

Everyone involved knew just which corporation Yamata was in charge of, but for delicacy's sake no one mentioned it. The public knew that he had engineered the stock market sabotage, not the full extent of how much damage he had done to the nation. "He should suffer more than just several consecutive life sentences." Koga mused aloud.

"Just so, Prime Minister." replied his visitor. "However the other zaibatsu heads share equal blame. It is a pity they are now dead."

Koga turned and sat back down on his chair. Respectfully, Hoshi Nasuno did remained standing until as his direct superior motioned for him to sit as well. "We cannot make the corporations suffer too much for the actions of their directors." the Prime Minister added. "They had the first taste of what would become the Ryan Doctrine, and if more suffering must be assigned then it should be for all of us that we have allowed them to operate like feudal lords for long. So, Nasuno, tell me how our much longer our economy will have to bear the pains of their folly."

Hoshi Nasuno was Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry. The Central Government Reform program had the MITI (Ministry of International Trade and Economy) merge with several other agencies related to economic activity, such as the Economic Planning Agency. This was part of the forced policy change pushed by the Americans after again winning a shooting war.

METI Minister Nasuno remembered that MITI escaped the judicious assassinations only because Yamata had bypassed their agency entirely. His predecessor had been ignominiously fired, nonetheless. "Our economy has just stabilized even with the depreciation of the yen. Our people continue to put their savings in banks, which fortunately means that essential capital is somewhat independent of the stock market."

"The *zaibatus* must learn humility. The people do not know the banks

are primarily responsible for this." Koga continued. Zaibatsus were vertically-oriented associations of companies, centered around a large holding company that holds stock in smaller companies, and a bank provides loans and financial support. The Japanese people put their faith in banks, which in turn gave up loans that enabled the companies to attempt riskier methods of growth. The madness of military adventurism was fueled by the people's good faith. "We must all now try to keep calm and not muddy the waters, until the world is ready to trust us again."

War was not a rational act. They required America's continued goodwill, the trade deficit between them just another proof of their inextricable relationship. Japan depended upon a web of coinciding interests and obsessive diversification. Business was business.

Fortunately for them, other events quickly took over the world's attention. After Saddam Hussein's assassination, Iran and Iraq briefly unified into the United Islamic and launched an WMD attack against the US with the Ebola virus. This kicked off the second Persian Gulf War, and sent oil prices spinning. After having stabbed Japan in the back in the conspiracy to remove the US Navy from the Pacific, China took overt means of claiming the 'Northern Resource Area'. Russia and China fought until, again, America intervened after Russia got inducted into NATO.

Prime Minister Koga groaned and rubbed at his forehead. "As long as Jack Ryan is around, it seems some new disaster will arrive to test America's resolve and the quality their military hardware. This latest calamity may be more than even they can handle."

"We have been nothing less than generous to GDI in terms of material support. There is not much more we can do without directly contributing military forces, Koga-san."

"Yes, that is why I had asked for this meeting. How is this affecting our economy?"

"Our growth rate is still stagnant, but the need for new technologies is fueling a global trade boom. The lower price of oil is also helping to keep transport costs enough to prevent runaway inflation."

"Not enough. We must have access to the Inner Sphere's markets." Only GDI could clear the way.

The disconnect between the cold, formal logic of their boardrooms and the hysteria of their pop culture was well-known. Most deemed this the natural effect of a society that sees great virtue in conformity, in emotional repression in formal matters, that the informal has to work twice as hard to compensate. The rebels of today become that conservatives of tomorrow; or so the saying goes.

Foreign companies that had the most success in dealing with the Japanese recognized that there was no disconnect. The manager was just as hysterical towards profit as the teen to his leather jackets and the 'scene'. Government policy encouraged a culture bent towards the accumulation of wealth.

To have money was not being wealthy. Wealth was -resources-. Status all over the world was marked by greater access to resources; be it the rock star to millions in dollars and adoring fans, the Joint Chiefs of Staffs and the ability to direct military forces through the globe, and of course the salaryman out to get his son into the 'good' schools.

Profit was -survival-.

"We cannot afford war." Nasuno explained after first apologizing for having to state the obvious. "It is not just in terms of military expenditure, but in the interruption of trade that daily nourishes our whole society. But it is trade that ties us to the wellbeing of other nations. "

Koga nodded. "Indeed, it is why the *zaibatsu* could excuse their actions in that the Americans first deliberately attacked our economy." *'We may not like it, but the facts are clear. There is no more room to expand on this planet.'* he thought. The growth of every company in its market shares was necessarily at the expense of another. That was also why many other nations resented Japan's dominance in their own markets with high-quality yet affordable mass-produced good. Mass production also had its own peril,

however. *'Someone needs to buy the goods we produce, or this economy is destroyed. Its energy is its own vulnerability.'*

Commerce, wealth, was the health of the nation, and his thoughts of late drifted towards how to sustain that level of growth. It was for good reason that other nations resented the dominance of Japanese products in their own markets. *'The Inner Sphere is something different. There we must -build- the necessary markets.'*

"It would only have delayed the inevitable. What affects one economy affects the world. Having antagonized the American and European markets, that would only leave China and India as the only appreciable sources of revenue. Surely they should have seen that these two have far less reason to be kindly disposed to our nation. Our old ally, America, held the advantage but for the most part did not press too hard. China and India, having inefficient economies of their own, would surely not hesitate to press their advantage."

"The plan was for a coordinated attack towards Siberia and the Northern Resource Area." Koga thought about it. It was Japanese resource explorers that first discovered the reserves. "We once held Sakhalin. Having it again would have granted us something our nation never possessed."

"*Hai*. Oil -is- the lifeblood of the worldwide economy."

Raizo Yamata tried to achieve economic independence through the acquisition of nuclear weapons and forcing other nations to accept a new equilibrium. It did not work. Ironically, Japan now had everything the man wanted, plus renewed investor confidence, all a -gift- from the skies.

"Fusion Power is a godsend.", Prime Minister Koga had to admit. It would finally allow them to wean off foreign oil and its unstable market, bringing the nation one step closer to its golden dream of self-sufficiency. That this also brought with it the knowledge of the existence of the Draconis Combine was a nightmare, but also something of a relief.

It was like they had spent the last fifty years preparing for just this

moment. Just as the Emperor would never bow to the Coordinator, so would the Land of the Rising Sun never bow down to the Dragon.

He brought his attention back to the Trade Minister. "How much in the development of mecha costing us, compared to what you would have needed to do to stimulate the economy?"

"It is hard to define, Koga-san. Many of the new production lines have been set by the corporations' own initiative, and the capital they use come from the banks. Two years back we had to release three hundred billion dollars worth in 'bailout money'." Because the yen was in turmoil at the time, it was a more precise value. "That is now in open circulation. We have, as before, put our support in construction works, but with the extremely high uncertainty of possible aggression from the Inner Sphere, there is no way of knowing how long before Hakone and the industries supporting it can turn a profit. It could be anywhere from five years, twenty years, or next year."

The reduction in oil prices helped stave off its effects in the economy, but that would not last. "How much is GDI offering to recoup our losses?"

METI had provided Nasuno with the estimates and TROs of the products expected from HINODE. "In the next year, Hakone is expected to produce at least twelve GM-1 BattleMecha and eight VF-1 Land-Air Mecha. At about four million bills and five million C-bills estimated value each, and converting that into dollars, the expected gross return would be seven hundred sixty-five million dollars."

The Prime Minister groaned. "Pitiful."

"At this rate, it will take eight years for everyone involved to recoup their losses. As facilities for mass production are set up, and research in other nations allow for cheaper, more plentiful parts such as heatsinks, weapons, and armor, production costs are expected to decrease. Selling assorted parts will further ameliorate the debt, specially as GDI wishes for parts commonality among most combat platforms. However, Koga-san, it is true that the export market will likely provide the best return for our investment."

"This is from Hakone alone. What about other interests?"

"DropShip and WarShip development will likely take longer. We know how to build nuclear weapons and their launch vehicles, but no longer the ability as per the renewed treaty. Semiconductors, metals, and I.T. companies are already experiencing a minor boom of their own. This is enough to stimulate other related areas of the economy, that the effects of Hakone as a money sink do not yet reach the public."

"I see. Nasuno-san, I must ask then the important question. Can we afford to do -more-?"

"I would have to say... yes, Koga-san. GDI takes its funding from many different nations, and thus they can well afford to pick up locally-produced machinery. Increasing our support of GDI allows us to bring more elements to their operations area. Specialists, scientists, entrepreneurs, they are the key to opening up the new markets we need. The quality of our products in GDI's hands serve as sufficient demonstration for potential clients. Our foreign debt is expected to increase, and as orbital facilities go online the metals market will likely go the same way as oil. However, our economy would only suffer from not taking action."

Koga nodded. With every nation on Earth doing its own thing, banks were unwilling to call in their debts. Homeworld security took precedence over all things, allowing Japan to operate with a surprising degree of independence.

'The Japanese people forever renounce war as the sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes', thus went the line in their Constitution. Yamata's course was clear treason. Magnificently, building war machines or sending voluntary brigades to GDI would not count. The debate was loud and long, and once again the Emperor had to cast a tie-breaking vote.

Survival.

Japan was allowed to build up its military to whatever strength it deemed necessary. Japan had stabilized against the dollar again, and though the new anti-trust and anti-protectionism laws remained in effect the corporations experienced short-term vibrant growth in consumer products (though their investments would not pay off for quite a while) from accelerated market motion. Once again, exactly as Yamata had peddled to the corporate heads that went along with his intricately planned fit of pique. The only true limitation was that off-world, GDI held complete authority over these units.

'If only he had waited.' That amused the Prime Minister greatly. Of course it was impossible to know ahead of time about their ISOT event, but things had developed to make the entire abortive US-Japan war completely unnecessary. *'We have lost much, but now we have the chance to flourish without fear again.'*

Mogataru Koga was determined not to let anyone, even the *zaibatsu* heads, fuck that up.

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HINODE Industrial Compact Testing Facility Hakone Region, Japan April 31, 2007/3022

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries was one of the many corporations that joined the Joint Venture to produce Earth's first ASF. It soon became clear that 'too many cooks could spoil the broth' and companies began to seek out specific lines of interests that would help the process of ASF production.

Through all this however, Mitsubishi had to consider that with so many companies invested into the BearCat ASF, each of them still had plenty let over for their own schemes. With major players from to Sukhoi to Rolls-Royce in the game, they felt it was redundant to try and run the race to innovate but rather to wait and refine the technology.

Japan, with its capture of a functional LAM and several scout mechs

with Jump Jets, had all that they needed to develop Fusion-powered engines for superior atmospheric performance. Data from this would then be fed into the BearCat's own avionics, still useful though it used a Fusion Rocket propulsion even in the atmosphere.

The Americans in going against F-15J Eagles discovered that those Mitsubishi-made jets held superior radar sets, though expertise in stealth and sneaky maneuvers still carried the day. The targeting and tracking system of the BearCat would benefit from this data and the electronics the corporation was expected to produce.

That was the extent of their participation. Mitsubishi promised support in terms of actual production of the craft, not its development. Other companies were much better in such theoretical realms of expertise.

Mitsubishi had other obligations.

Mitsubishi, like most of the *keiretsu* mainstays, had to support the legions of suppliers that provided the parts and resources for their products. They made more than just cars. Sony, Hitachi and the other electronics giants were geared towards producing control parts and myomer bundles. Fortunately one did not need as much superconducting material. Nippon Steel was the world's second largest producer of steel, but they were vastly more diversified and conducted research more than the company in the top spot, and thus had the natural inclination to figure out the riddle of Endo Steel. Mitsubishi Heavy Industries also had a great stake in figuring out Fusion Engines and the Jump Jet/Thrusters.

Japan did not have the rose-tinted reverence others had towards Star League technology. It was -technology-, and therefore there was substantial determination in that they must be able to reverse-engineer it. Duplicating the existing parts proved a difficult but rewarding exercise.

"Many of my country men have fallen in love with their proposed Land-Air-Mechs. It will be enjoyable seeing their faces when we roll out our first fighters and Dropships in a mere fraction of the time they waste attempting to perfect their 'toys'. Mitsubishi will agree to this venture as

well." Hikio Natsura of Mitsubishi had said in the meeting to discuss the Joint Venture to create the world's first ASF.

It was a logical enough perspective, he did not understand the obsession the companies had towards producing something just from 'anime'. Military necessities had to trump otaku leanings.

He had shown company disloyalty, however. Though events had set it aside, other nations had not yet forgotten that Japan attempted to sabotage the global market, and that Mitsubishi did not produce its own aircraft but rather just copied the designs of others.

Japanese industry had long been accused of not being able to innovate. Their Air Defense Force did not have any unique aircraft but rather used variants of those found in other nations. Their primary asset was the McDonnell Douglas F-15 Eagle, manufactured under license and with Japanese electronics as the F-15J. Incidentally, by Mitsubishi. Other supersonic aircraft, the Mitsubishi T2 and the Kawasaki T4, were based off the SEPECAT Jaguar. The JASDF had expressed willingness to acquire the Eurofighter Typhoon for their next-generation fighter. Not since the end of WW2 had any completely new combat aircraft been produced in Japanese territory, by choice, it was far more efficient to purchase innovation and perfect the technology than to invest in basic development. From cars to computers, this had always been the route by which Japan had outpaced its competitors.

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries was considered small fry, in that gathering. He was young, and his forthright demeanor was good for dealing with foreign businessmen. Mitsubishi agreed, no qualms, with the Joint Venture. The company did not appreciate the insult he had delivered against his own countrymen.

The form was immaterial, but function followed -people- with reason and enthusiasm for the task. Like the same *zaibatsu* heads that mistook their role in the economy as health for the nation as whole, there were many in management who forgot the essential psychology of the very minds that produced their products.

One year later, he was chided for his lack of faith. Japan had outbid

and was ready to produce the *GM*, the world's first true BattleMech well ahead of anyone else. The LAM project was not an AeroSpace Fighter, but a BattleMech frame with very high mobility values. In January of 2007, they had already duplicated the conversion mechanisms to enable the mercenaries' light BattleMechs to convert into LAMs. That was two more LAMs than what they had started out with.

They had to work very, very hard to recover the reputation Raizo Yamata's foolishness had cost them. They now had the additional pressure of moving from test to production, twenty-four new mecha in a year. There was no time to rest, exhausting as the development process as may be. Being chosen by GDI was not enough to make up for the dishonor, but it was a start.

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Mitsubishi Heavy Industry produced everything from cars, to ships, to aircraft, and even nuclear power plants. They had less to risk from the market closure, but inevitably as its suppliers crashed and burned even the giant would become vulnerable.

The *zaibatsu* heads who went along with Koga had either mysteriously vanished or died very conspicuous deaths. A CEO was answerable to the Board of Directors of a company. They had to be held accountable too, but unfortunately Ministry of International Trade and Industry could not apply any real force against them. Shame and dishonor had to suffice. There was politics even inside the boardroom, and sometimes the majority took action even without the knowledge of certain others that would surely have objected or even tried to sabotage the consensus. These who had nothing to do with the disaster had now greater voice over the direction they must now go.

Hiroyuki Fukuda was fifty-four years old. He had no memories of the war, only of a nation fighting for every scrap of respectability. For him, it Japan had grown before his eyes like a rose in the rain, beautiful, fragile. To do as his grandfather and grandfather did, to

sublimate his own will into something that would risk harm to the nation? Unthinkable! No one's pride, not even the Emperor's, should go before the safety of the nation and its citizens. Yamata and his manipulations... how so short-sighted! The corporations, in a total trade war, would suffer. But the nation would survive. It was in the present that one must endure to prepare for the future, not the reverse.

The Mitsubishi corporate jet touched down at one of the new Hakone airfields. A part of him thought it was a waste to lose so many excellent golf courses, but it was very small price to secure the future. The SUNRISE group was composed of practically every heavy-hitter in Japan's list of big businesses, along with the approval of the government, and thus though culturally they avoided direct confrontation when the collective acts it does so with monstrous force. Yamata's invisible take-over of the keiretsu and thus indirectly the government and its armed forces, had proved that. There were new checks and balances to make sure that no one would ever again confuse the wellbeing of their own companies for that of the nation.

'In many ways, coming here is unnecessary.' the old man mused as he let himself be led away by junior management flunkies, making only perfunctory gestures in return. *'It is the will of the Diet, the people, and the Emperor, that we will accept nothing less than success.'*

This sort of brash optimism was not unprecedented, but fortunately unlike 1942 and Yamata's incredible gall in sabotaging the US stock market, crippling two aircraft carriers and sinking two submarines, plus the seizure of the Marianas (all just as the opening move) their results met up well with the predictions. Machines were no mystery. They were predictable. Plans were not the same as people, so many in the higher executive positions had lost sight of that.

Hakone was just the primary prototyping and testing facility. Research into materials science went on all over Japan, taking priority one over all other concerns; even consumer products. There was a minor market shock, in that for a year, only a smattering of the expected ever-new and more sophisticated gadgets appeared in Akibahara.

HINODE's AeroSpace initiatives were primarily of Mitsubishi and Fuji

Heavy Industries. The hangars and facilities were duplicates of their own facilities. Many of the essential research were still being carried out in the home laboratories, but Fukuda knew that true breakthroughs could happen nowhere else but here, in Hakone. The company car approached HANGAR 131, and the old man could feel the car's own metal skin start to vibrate.

As he stepped out of the car, the dull roar turned into the breath of a dragon. Fukuda smiled. There was nothing quite like the roar of jet engine, except perhaps Gojira-san's challenge to the world. Beyond profit, it was the fulfillment of mankind's old dream - to fly.

"FUKUDA-SAN!" Operations Manager Ono bowed low. "IT IS AN HONOR! THIS IS NOT A VERY HOSPITABLE PLACE. WHAT CAN WE DO FOR YOU?"

"WHERE IS HE?" Their voices sounded angry, but it was necessary. The noise was that loud. "WHERE IS MORINO REI?!"

"REI-SENSEI IS INSIDE. PLEASE WAIT A -" one of the technicians approached to give a combination headset radio/ear protectors to the old man. As soon as he put it on, the manager's voice became clearer through the headset. "Our deepest apologies, sir. Please wait a moment, and we will call for him."

"No need. Where is he? Inside, you say? Then I will go inside."

Manager Ono hesitated, but bowed again. Sure, the hangar was a 'Danger Zone' as long as the Jump Jet was turned on, but he had no authority to deny the inspection.

The hangar was big enough, but it was hard not to notice the Jump Jet on the far side. It blazed red, the glow pulsing on and off. The Jump Jet was laid on its side, on heavy mountings preventing it from moving no matter what. Nevertheless, sensors calculate how much mass that thrust was expected to lift.

"How long has this this been active?"

"Fourteen days and five hours now, Fukuda-san."

The old man nodded. It was standard procedure to perform a continued test for reliability. Two weeks was nothing really, he knew that Pratt and Whitney had concluded recently three thousand engine test hours for their F-35 engine. It was a shame that such an excellent engine would just be set aside for second-line airbreathing conventional fighters. He had many things to say about BT technology, but Fukuda openly admired their simple rugged resilience. If that was a BT Jump Jet, then it should be capable of much more than that. If that was a -copy- of a BT Jump Jet, then at the very least it should manage at least a dozen engine test hours without anything breaking loose.

Close by was the Nissan 175 Fusion Engine. The old man marveled at just how small it was, capable of matching up to power plants many times its size and here it just devoted to warming up air into plasma. War was such a magnificent waste of potential. No matter.

On a raised gantry, Professor Rei stared at the assembly much like Galileo must have considered his Mona Lisa. He was tall, scruffy-looking, his hair still in the puffy afro. The old man decided he did not want to know. The professor's assistant for the day was Dr. Ikumi Nanbara.

"Has been getting enough sleep?"

"As far as we know, Fukuda-san." Contrary to rumors, she did not share Prof. Rei's bed. The man might as well have been asexual. She was not the first woman to find him infuriating for a variety of reasons, but someone had to take care of that useful brain. Prof. Rei had multiple doctorates, but preferred the title of professor, sensei, a teacher. By his own logic, that was what he was, wasn't he? He never cured anyone of anything. That same brain demanded nothing but total accuracy, even from himself. "But probably not."

Hiroyuki Fukuda was Athur Morino Rei's father-in-law. Being put in charge of both the GM and VF projects would have stank of nepotism, were it not for Prof. Rei so conspicuously -brilliant- in the scientific community. So brilliant, in fact, that it was why Fukuda had not raised more than a token protest when his only daughter had nine

years back decided to marry her sweetheart straight from the university.

"Rei-sensei." the old man bowed stiffly.

"Fukuda-jiji." the scientist merely gave a brief nod. *'Old man Fukuda'* that was what the honorific implied.

Between them, Dr. Nanbara looked uncomfortable. As much as she was popular among foreigners for her outspoken nature, so did being too blunt hamper her relationships with others. The two men's mannerisms were too direct to the point of antipathy.

"You weren't here during the tech demo." Prof. Rei continued.

"I'm surprised you even noticed." That was three months ago. Prof. Rei's long-term memory of mundane matters was notoriously unreliable. So was his short-term memory, for that matter.

The scientist nodded and turned back to the bank of monitors. "The demonstration date was set weeks in advance. I couldn't just disappear."

"She would not hold it against you." the old man replied. January 21 was the wedding day between Arthur Rei and Fuyumi Fukuda. The old man had visited her grave to explain.

What the two men shared was an understanding that had no need for the usual run-around. Hiroyuki Fukuda's own wife, Fuyumi's mother, had died soon after giving birth. His own mother had also died early, not from the Tokyo bombings directly, from the lack of hospitals and medicine. He had no idea how it was for his own father, but given that the man was born in era of rapid change from feudalism into industrialization, it was likely that he had his own difficulties. It was like a family curse.

As always, rather than deal with a painful memory head-on, both men just let work bury their attentions. "Is this Jump Jet one of their or one of ours?"

"Ours. It's a hybrid. There is a turbofan compressor to compensate for that we don't have enough superconductors to heat up the air to the degree of a normal BT Jump Jet."

Director Fukuda frowned. The reliability of the BT Jump Jet rested upon its brute simplicity. It took in air, heated it up with the Fusion Reactor until it became plasma, and vented it right out to hurl a 50-ton unaerodynamic lump of metal fifty meters straight into the air. However, any air intake was an obvious vulnerability and added mechanical complexity. "Is there any benefit to this arrangement?"

"Each JumpJet has its own intake. Compared to conventional engines, the inlets are tiny. Unlike normal jets, we require no fuel. Unlike BT jets, the plasma jet can provide as much thrust for less heat."

The implications did not escape the old man. "You can hover."

"We can hover."

The ability for a Variable Fighter to hover in place had long been a mainstay of Macross-style tactics. Though intended as mere entertainment, many of the minds behind the mechanical design of such things had spent long hours contemplating what it would take to make such movements possible.

Once attained, what could then be done? Prof. Rei explained how it was such a point of frustration (specially for Shoji Kawamori) that for some reason, BT LAMs were incapable of that most basic of VTOL capabilities. They had more than enough thrust for the job. Why did they require jumping and flying around rather than a controlled hover closer to the ground?

"It's true that jumping around makes it hard to predict what you'll do next, but what about the necessary delay between jumps? Look, the back-bent legs of LAM is really inefficient at walking and running." Compared to other avian-frame legs, the LAM's legs bent back too far just to keep its center of gravity.

It was in the nature of the Jump Jets. They were forced ramjets,

relying on the expansion of hot gases out a nozzle to provide lift. The problem with venting plasma straight out the reactor was that energetic as the reaction may be, they were also extremely hot. All that heat has to go somewhere. The Jump Jets made one long burn, then cut off. A constant burn would strain the heatsinks to capacity, which left very little to the more practical effort of firing weapons to actually destroy the enemy.

"Is it THAT important that our Land-Air Mecha be capable of controlled hovering?"

Prof. Rei turned around, and his eyes lost the characteristic sleepy disinterest. "From what we know of how the Inner Sphere uses their mecha, a pilot jumps into the air, brakes suddenly with the leg thrusters, and goes into a barely-controlled crash landing. This makes their movements unpredictable. This is good. But this is VSTOL, not VTOL."

He gestured wildly in the air. "This accomplishes two things. First, the landing phase for the old maneuver goes from 'barely-controlled' into 'controllable', much safer and less stressful for the pilot. Second, hover mode functions not just in Gerwalk mode but in Battroid too. This is based on test results from the "Action" ZAKU Hover Lift System. In Gerwalk, this allows sustained movement of 300kph in whatever direction. In Battroid, it allows for brief bursts in speed and longer jumps, enough that the mecha should get far enough enough to transform safely."

"I suppose the reason why even the Star League did not pursue this area of research is mechanical complexity. How does it compare to the Fusion rockets of AeroSpace Fighters? How will this affect a LAM's performance in Fighter mode?"

"We have a problem with that." Prof. Rei conceded. "We give up practically all 'Space' capability for efficiency in atmospheric operations. It can still maneuver, of course, using fuel for propellant, but likely all it will need to do is to maneuver for insertion. It does no good to try and fight -three battles - space, air, ground - straight after another."

That was not good news for Mitsubishi, which looking to produce Japan's first production ASF. "So it cannot compete with ASFs?"

"Not in space, no."

"In the atmosphere?"

"We haven't done any tests, so it's impossible to say. The computer models do predict that the hybrid engine should perform to the level of a 'pure' Fusion thruster. It will depend more upon the shape of the airframe. "

The rush of air helped immeasurably in terms of fuel efficiency. For so long, Earth had to hurl twenty or so tons of airframe into the sky past the speed of sound with two engines to provide thrust. The thrust provided by burning fuel sufficed through extensive research into making do with what they had never really considered as 'inferior' technology. Fusion-powered Engines were just that staggeringly more powerful. There would have been no point in trying to optimize conventional airbreathing engines to compete; never would they be able to carry as much weight for so long. Brute endurance was the defining advantage of the Fusion-powered jet.

Once again Mitsubishi was coaxing first-class performance out of a second-rate engine. As Prof. Rei explained, no one in the history of the Terran Hegemony saw any need to push the bar that far. Earth's own engines had such performance at low weight, perhaps as unto an XL ICE, simply because they had not known any better. This was all they had to work with, so there was a vested interest in improving it to the furthest possible extent.

Combining the performance-boosting components of the lightweight combustion jet engine to the enduring quality of the Fusion engine, they could therefore coax the same level of jump ability at half the expected jump heat and the same weight. It was too good to be true, Fukuda considered. There had to be an obvious disadvantage.

"How difficult would it be to produce this Hybrid Jump Jet?"

Prof. Rei shrugged. How the hell should he know? He provided

technical solutions, not economic ones. Fortunately, as ever, his students were ready to cover his areas of disinterest.

"We have already sent the proposal over to the Mitsubishi Lab. The most difficult part of is finding materials that are sufficiently lightweight but still, as Rei-sensei said, PPC proof. Our electronics are very vulnerable to EMP effects." Dr. Nanbara bowed a bit, to apologize for not being able to give a direct value. "However, we can produce it with completely native parts and materials. Just as we have been told, the Americans have completed their Fusion Rocket, so are we ready to begin production."

"Most of this is software anyway." the professor added, losing interest again. "The Plasma Rate Governor should be 'black-boxed', and even if we export the Hybrid Engine, it would be difficult for anyone else to duplicate. The Inner Sphere would first have to find some way of integrating some automatic control mechanism just as small, lightweight, and responsive as our microchips."

Fukuda stared down at the burning Jump Jet engine again. The possibilities were enormous. It was not just for the LAM, but a hybrid Fusion jet engine if scaled up would allow for massive cargo capacities. Ships have always had the the advantage in that they were the cheapest way of transporting things all over the planet, if much slower than most other alternatives. There were now new oceans, new words, and new markets to explore. The Americans, with their space shuttle technology, were preparing an aerospace shuttle carrier. In the upper atmosphere, a ramjet could attain literally obscene fuel efficiencies, and with Fusion power practically free movement. Japan's recent sins had seen the closure of many opportunities, but space... no one could deny them that. They had in good faith poured funds and expertise into GDI. They had the -right-.

It would be much, much cheaper than having to build single-shot rockets just to throw a few tons outside of the gravity well. DropShips were too precious, too few, to ever become their primary launching mechanism. It would help that the Hybrid Engine would also put less strain on the environment than the pure Fusion exhaust of DropShips. Cheap lift capability was something that Japan sorely needed.

And they made this just for something that would go off to shoot things up. War. He sighed. What a waste. Fortunately desperation made for leaps normally no one would dare contemplate.

"Would you like to see the LAMs?" Prof. Rei asked suddenly.

Fukuda nodded slowly. The *GMs* were costly, but development costs for them were about half as much as that of the VF project. The BattleMech project was off its prototype stage and ready to be put into production. It was now time for Mitsubishi to see if its own investments were bearing fruit.

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Inside the car and on the way to the second site, Hiroyuki Fukuda commented blandly "I have been to the second venture review meeting, and just as in the first, no one asked the stupidly obvious question." The other aerospace interests were subtly amused or disdainful at Japan's insistence on following the expensive LAM route.

Prof. Rei did not react. That stupidly obvious question was why he was put in charge of both GM and VF projects.

"It is a question that not even the inventors of the LAM asked. Why is that?"

Seeing the teacher was once again off somewhere distant, mentally, it was Dr. Nanbara who answered. "Even the Star League must deal with competition. The inventor of the LAM, Orguss Company, produced battlemechs. To try and compete with ASFs would have been disastrous, it would have been impossible to match ASF prices, but there was a reasonable cost comparison with existing Medium battlemechs. If the Star League did not do it, then obviously no one else saw worth in pursuing that line of inquiry. There was more profit in producing distinct other products."

They arrived at Hangar 140, and there the two LAMs rested. Miriya's *Wasp LAM* with the red trim remained in Battroid mode. It was used

for agility tests in the humanoid frame. Max's *Stinger* LAM, with its blue trim, was in Fighter mode. The *Stinger* in Fighter mode had an uncanny resemblance to the F-15 Eagle and F-14 Tomcat Fighter Jets. Mitsubishi had the license to produce the F-15J air superiority fighter, and had steadily been tinkering with it over years and years. It was that which gave them confidence to tackle the transforming airframe.

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Prof. Rei had decided to research by taking all the Macross, Dougram, and Gundam series DVDs and watching them in one long marathon session. Someone brought in Genesis Climber Mospeada, Megazone 23, and Bubblegum Crisis for comparison's sake. Then eventually they got to Full Metal Panic. Then FMP: Fumoffu. Before they knew it, they were watching the Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi.

The women of Prof. Rei's team had to drag them out of the room.
"That's not research anymore! Get back to work, you lazy foals!"

Two days later, Prof. Rei walked into the HINODE planning session and asked "Hey, we have an airframe that we know works with a Fusion reactor and is capable of supersonic flight or orbital insertion. Why don't we just use that as basis for the AeroSpace Fighter?"

Objections basically boiled down to 'the Star League didn't do it'. But why? If the mecha components were removed, the *Stinger* in fighter mode could perform to the level of known conventional fighters; the principles for agility and the control surfaces were in the familiar shapes. It was not like the Hellcat II, a broad-wing design, that for its ability in the air took up lots of hangar space. Had LexaTech decided to pursue an ASF using only the *Stinger* frame in Fighter mode, it would have come to light that such an ASF would cost only slightly more than half a *Stinger* LAM.

"We have the airframe. We can purchase Fusion Thruster technology." Prof. Rei added, in a completely unexcited tone. "Building on the *Stinger* frame, which is also the basis for the *Phoenix Hawk* frame, will reduce the amount of different parts we have to produce."

Later, to Emilio Lang, he summarized even further. "Let us fuck with their minds so that they will be completely unable to predict if what's after them is a LAM or an ASF."

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"This is the shape of our production LAM..." Director Fukuda whispered appreciatively. The production LAMs and ASFs would have certain features changed to reduce air intake vulnerability and stealth purposes. The LAM was the middle ground between 'Mech and ASF, sharing the qualities of both to cover for limited lift capability. HINODE had to build a pure ASF anyway, if just for performance comparisons.

Just as Japan had two years lead in BattleMech production, they had the better part of year to examine LAM transformation. One of those modes, of course, was as a Fighter. Fukuda wondered why the rest of the world was unable to look past the LAM and recognize that through it, Japanese Industry and Research already had the elements of a working BT AeroSpace Fighter. "What are you proposing for our production ratios?"

It was numbers, so Prof. Rei could recall it easily. "Well, for the LAM we're looking at 25% parts commonality with the ASF and 40% with the *GM*. I can tell you that according to the Technical Read-Out, the *VF-1 LAM* will cost only slightly more than the *GM*, while its ASF mode stripped of all Mecha parts will cost only about half of it to produce."

"I need something more specific than that, Rei-kun."

"The TRO don't really SAY how much it will cost for us to produce, you know. The calculations only say about the general prices of... stuff... in the Inner Sphere, and what they might be expecting to pay for a complete machine."

Fukuda nodded. "That is fine. We have intended our products for export value right from the start."

"*So ka*. I'll go get the TROs."

"I'll do it, Rei-sensei." Dr. Nanbara cut in. Likely as not, the professor would encounter some technician with a question or something shiny and completely forget about why he had gone into the hangar in the first place.

TROs served as overall guidelines for construction. Everyone there knew that they were but ratcheted values were for the sake of game balance, but it surprised even BT technicians that the mass ratios, specially between Engines and Internal Structures, were so close to reality. The prices were subject to vagaries of the different House markets of course, but the listed price was not more than two or three hundred thousand C-bills off. That was still a munificent sum, but a workable estimate.

Dr. Nanbara returned with several printouts.

"Our first priority with the LAM, unlike the *GMs*, is not for a robust weapons platform but just something that works according to specifications. It's very unlikely that any LAM would have to fight so soon. The *Variable Fighter-1* prototype just needs to outperform the known capabilities of a stock *Stinger* or *Phoenix Hawk LAM*. The *Space/Strike Fighter-1* is going to serve as the testbed machine to measure the performance of LAMs. The first production run will be trainers for the next line of true combat-capable machines."

Hiroyuki Fukuda put on his glasses and looked at the first looked at the LAM's TRO.

Code:

BattleMech Technical Readout

Type/Model:	Variable Fighter-01 LAM Experimental
Tech:	Inner Sphere / 3025
Config:	Land Air BattleMech
Rules:	Level 3, Standard design

Mass:	40 tons
Chassis:	Standard

Power Plant: 200 Nissan Fusion
 Walking Speed: 54.0 km/h
 Maximum Speed: 86.4 km/h
 Jump Jets: 5 Standard Jump Jets
 Jump Capacity: 150 meters
 Armor Type: Standard
 Armament:
 1 Light AC/5
 2 Medium Lasers
 2 Rocket Launcher 10 (OS)s
 Manufacturer: (Unknown)
 Location: (Unknown)
 Communications System: (Unknown)
 Targeting & Tracking System: (Unknown)

Type/Model: VF-01 LAM Experimental
 Mass: 40 tons

Equipment:	Crits	Mass
Int. Struct.: 67 pts Standard	0	4.00
Engine: 200 Fusion	6	8.50
Walking MP: 5		
Running MP: 8		
Jumping MP: 5 [15]		
Heat Sinks: 10 Single	2	.00
(Heat Sink Loc: 1 LT, 1 RT)		
Gyro:	4	2.00
Small Cockpit, Life Supt., Sensors:	4	2.00
Actuators: L: Sh+UA+LA+H R: Sh+UA+LA+H	16	.00
Armor Factor: 128 pts Standard	0	8.00

	Internal Structure	Armor Value
Head:	3	9
Center Torso:	12	16
Center Torso (Rear):		5
L/R Side Torso:	10	14/14
L/R Side Torso (Rear):		5/5
L/R Arm:	6	11/11

L/R Leg:

10

19/19

Weapons and Equipment	Loc	Heat	Ammo	Crits	Mass
1 Light AC/5	RA	1	20	3	6.00
(Ammo Locations: 1 RA)					
1 Medium Laser	RT	3		1	1.00
1 Rocket Launcher 10 (OS)	RT	3		1	.50
1 Medium Laser	LT	3		1	1.00
1 Rocket Launcher 10 (OS)	LT	3		1	.50
5 Standard Jump Jets:				5	2.50
(Jump Jet Loc: 1 LT, 1 RT, 1 CT, 1 LL, 1 RL)					
LAM Conversion Equipment:				0	4.00

TOTALS:		7		44	40.00
Crits & Tons Left:				34	.00

Calculated Factors:

Total Cost: 5,208,046 C-Bills
 Battle Value: 1,092
 Cost per BV: 4,769.27
 Weapon Value: 575 / 575 (Ratio = .53 / .53)
 Damage Factors: SRDmg = 22; MRDmg = 12; LRDmg = 3
 BattleForce2: MP: 5J, Armor/Structure: 3/3
 Damage PB/M/L: 2/2/-, Overheat: 0
 Class: MM; Point Value: 11

He frowned and looked again. "This does not use Endo Steel."

The most critical factor ramping up LAM costs was Endo Steel. The Japanese had taken command of that line of research, for while most of the other nations gave over the use of their captured DropShips for transport between Antallos and Earth, or for space exploitation, Japan dedicated its Leopard DropShip to pure research.

"Just like with the GM, there's going to be two types, one for GDI use and another for export." Dr. Rei was shifting his weight from one foot to the other and humming the 'Sobakasu' theme. "We save just one ton instead of nearly removing the weight penalty of conversion

equipment with Endo Steel. The GDI LAM loses just one ton, the Export three tons."

It was already explained to Director Fukuda that the .5 tons of the Rocket Launcher/10 was a placeholder for a 500-kilogram bomb or two air-to-air missiles. The "Small Cockpit" was only in comparison to BT cockpits; by normal standards, compared to the one in the F-15J, it held luxurious leg room. "I see. How is the GDI Issue LAM different from this export version?"

"Not very much. That's just two tons advantage. More armor, of course, extra ammo for the VAC/5, and one more heatsink. The problem is that even the Hybrid Engine still produces heat, which limits how long it can go. All that jumping around keeps the LAM heat from building up unnecessarily. Two more heatsinks would mean that the GDI LAM can jump and hover for longer than the export version."

Internal and Export LAMs had the same level of firepower. Director Fukuda was unsure of the wisdom of that. It would help promote the idea that export LAMs were not intentionally crippled versions of true GDI LAMs. They were the best available. He smiled a bit. That was even literally true. The only other producer of LAMs, the Draconis Combine factory at Irece, produced LAMs that had a quarter less armor and half the firepower while being ten tons lighter and two-thirds of the list price less.

Others had made breakthroughs in Point Eight armor and carbon nanotubes, and were well on the way towards practical Fusion. That was fine. *'We can always purchase the technology later.'* thought Fukuda.

On their side, surprisingly, it was Endo Steel that broke first. It was not so much an entirely new material but the arrangement of steel and carbon into a lattice. Unlike the KF-drive, most of what goes into a BattleMech still had to obey the laws of physics. Atoms could only be arranged in so many ways; often the most cursedly difficult portion was not the theory or proving its existence, but the practical production.

All they needed to know was that it -existed-. Steel was steel, no matter how one tried to change it. Not even the BT universe had alchemy, to change one element for another. It was very likely some form of alloy. It might not even be Endo 'Steel', just a brand name, but there were known alternatives to that too. It was merely open-cell foamed metal.

"It's either Endo Steel or Light Fusion." Prof. Rei added.

"What?"

"We have two main methods of reducing the weight of any mecha using a Fusion reactor. The first, is to use Endo Steel to reduce its overall mass but not its volume. The other is to strip out safety features of an existing Fusion Engine and use more lightweight shielding materials. Like Endo Steel, it's going to be slightly bulkier from all predictions. It won't be as vulnerable or hard to make an Extra-Light Engine, though."

"That sounds... dangerous."

"There's really no other way. We can't shrink a Fusion Engine anymore. We don't even know how to make any Fusion Reactor smaller than a building, must less to try messing with the fundamentals of something that already works." Prof. Rei nodded. "Oh, we're going to go down that route anyway."

"The Clans, Fukuda-san." Dr. Nanbara added helpfully. "We've had success duplicating basic materials, but much of Star League technology, specially in the bionics field, is stil beyond us. The Clans have Star League technology and are said to have been refining it for two hundred fifty years now."

Japan had in panic rapidly industrialized, from seeing the gap between it and and the West. Fukuda shuddered to imagine what it would be like to face someone with two hundred fifty years advantage.

"Endo Steel is safer, and more importantly, we already have it." he concluded. The other two nodded in assent.

As expected it could not be produced on Earth, and even in zero-G they wasted nine out of ten batches from the final phase of the process while inside the refitted DropShip Daedalus. Over a year, four days out of every week, they had slowly stockpiled a workable amount. Most of that went into the GNDM and the two LAM refits.

The old man smiled thinly. To be sure, they did not know if it was indeed the same as Star League Endo Steel. For all they knew, there were different types of material under the heading 'Endo Steel', after all, had they not several different theories as to its composition? The important thing was that 'Nihon-type' Endo Steel was at least as strong as the Standard frame (which was really nothing more than foamed aluminium wrapped in good high-temperature steel and several other composites).

Endo Steel was, as expected, bulky. The memory of his flustered engineers amused him still; for them, savings in weight -naturally- came with a reduction in size. It made no sense to them. Miniaturization had always been the key.

Survivability, now; the order came from on high. Never again would Mitsubishi make the mistake of the Zeke, the Mitsubishi A6M Type Zero, trying to get first-rate performance out of a second-rate engine by sacrificing armor and the lives of its pilots. Whatever weight saved just went into armor, to counter the slightly greater fragility of the internal frame.

Next, affordability. The *VF-1 LAM* was intended to undercut all known LAMs in the Inner Sphere, so much so that the Federated Suns would be all over the machine trying to grab at something only the Kuritans could previously deploy in any sizable quantity. It was well suited to their own methods of mobile warfare. The Draconis Combine would either have to force their own factories to match the quality (a highly unlikely prospect) or mass buy from GDI and SUNRISE to upgrade their own line of LAM forces.

The Steiners? What, only four million? What a bargain! Much as they might rely on heavy and assault 'mechs, something that could serve as both 'mech and fighter may -seem- like the perfect stopgap to their

own woeful Medium/fast response doctrines.

Japan had absolutely no fear of not finding LAM buyers. The (gleeful) reaction of every Inner Sphere technician or MechWarrior they had interviewed so far bore out this scenario.

He turned to the next page, the *SF-1 X AeroSpace* version.

Code:

AeroTech 2 Vessel Technical Readout
VALIDATED

Class/Model/Name: Space/Strike Fighter - 01 SF-01J
Tech: Inner Sphere / 3025
Vessel Type: Aerospace Fighter
Rules: Level 2, Standard design
Rules Set: AeroTech2

Mass: 50 tons
Length: 16 meters
Power Plant: 200 Fusion
Safe Thrust: 6
Maximum Thrust: 9
Armor Type: Standard
Armament:

- 1 Large Laser
- 2 RL 10 (OS)
- 3 Medium Laser
- 2 LRM 5

Class/Model/Name: Space/Strike Fighter - 01 SF-01J
Mass: 50 tons

Equipment:

Power Plant: 200 Fusion
Thrust: Safe Thrust: 6 (5 at max bomb load)
Maximum Thrust: 9 (8 at max bomb load)
Structural Integrity: 6
Total Heat Sinks: 17 Single

Fuel:

Cockpit & Attitude Thrusters:

Armor Type: Standard (200 total armor pts)

	Standard Scale Armor Pts
Location:	L / R
Nose:	67
Left/Right Wings:	50/50
Aft:	33

Weapons and Equipment	Loc	SRV	MRV	LRV
1 Large Laser	Nose	8	8	--
1 RL 10 (OS)	Nose	6	6	--
1 RL 10 (OS)	Nose	6	6	--
1 Medium Laser	Nose	5	--	--
1 Medium Laser	RW	5	--	--
1 Medium Laser	LW	5	--	--
1 LRM 5	RW	3	3	3
1 LRM 5	LW	3	3	3
Ammo (LRM 5) 24	---			

TOTALS:

Tons Left:

External Stores Load:

5 Laser-Guided (LG) Bombs (5 tons)

Total Stores Load 5 tons total

Note: Safe Thrust is reduced from 6 to 5 at max bomb

Calculated Factors:

Total Cost: 2,390,208 C-Bills

Battle Value: 1,159

Cost per BV: 2,062.3

Weapon Value: 1,737 (Ratio = 1.50)

Damage Factors: SRV = 30; MRV = 14; LRV = 1; ERV =

BattleForce2: MP: 6, Armor/Structure: 5 / 0

Damage PB/M/L: 3/1/1, Overheat: 0

Class: FM; Point Value: 12

Specials: if

"Why is this fifty tons?" The proposed first-run VF-01 LAM was only 40 tons.

"Unlike mecha, the ASF does not need to obey the hardcoded limits of the BT gryo, Fukuda-san." Dr. Nanbara noted. "The only real consideration is the capacity of the engines. Because Rei-sensei intended the SF, VF, and GMs to use the same class 200 Fusion Engine, the Fusion Rocket Thrusters are capable of carrying an extra load with no reduction in maneuverability. It is a Medium Fighter, and the maximum thrust of 4.5 G is a compromise between speed, fuel efficiency, and effective armament."

"One Large Laser, three Medium Lasers, and a mix of missiles." The old thought about what about that seemed most familiar. "Ah! The Export GM has as its armament one Large Laser and three Medium Lasers as well."

"If the GMs on the ground have PPCs, let the SFs carry a PPC as its most powerful weapon. If they have Lasers, let it have Lasers." Prof. Rei added. "Weapons are also included in parts commonality. Of course, since we haven't started production on any LAM or ASF, there is still time to decide if more armor or speed would be of better use."

"An ASF is less exotic technology. We can overcharge slightly with the LAM, but if we are to believe the listed price as how difficult it would be to produce in the Inner Sphere, then two million C-bills is worth almost half of a LAM or Mech of comparable firepower."

Prof. Rei nodded. "And thus why the inventors of the LAM buried any possible links to their products with any ASF. If their parts were unique, then the Star League had to buy up a sizable stockpile. For certain reasons, the ASF does seem more fragile in its internal structure, but we can attempt to fix that. Even if it costs almost as much as a GM, it's worth it if it becomes more capable of surviving a hit that manages to blow through the armor." What the hell was up with the 'six points' of structural integrity? A LAM had over fifty points of it. They did have some *Seydlitz* airframes from Antallos, and the reality of it was that ASF shells were monocoque. Assigning arbitrary values to practical concerns was dangerous, of course,

which was why Prof. Rei wanted to design the ASF with the same internal reinforcement as its LAM.

"How soon can you begin prototyping?"

Prof. Rei just shook his head. He was considering if it was worth it, to reduce the firepower of the ASF to exactly that of a LAM, just to ensure that the SF-1 was capable of taking sustained damage to its separate sections.

At seeing him unwilling to answer, Dr. Nanbara explained "The two LAMs you see here, plus the third experimental refit of a *Phoenix Hawk*, are the only LAMs we can have for the foreseeable future. We need more Fusion Engines before we can go anywhere. The Americans are said to be using between Class 120 to 175 Engine for their new ASF, and these are reportedly very common Engines. We require the Class 200 as the balance between performance and weight for three different machines. It's also reportedly easy to find, the Outworld Alliance makes them, but we just don't have any. We are the only nation on Earth with the production lines ready to produce BattleMechs, but even the GM requires the Engine.

The ones showed at the demonstration used a class 240 Engine. We can't produce mecha like that, just using whatever Engine we can scrounge up." Those Engines were taken from salvaged Heavy Mechs.

"Understandable. We must look for easy logistics to support our own interests in GDI." Director Fukuda folded the TROs and handed back the papers. While interesting, it would crease his suit to keep them in his pocket. "The Near Periphery Trading Company has already sent out bids for as many Engines as it can have. Rest assured we will secure the Engines you require."

Prof. Rei blinked, back from whatever contemplations he had had strayed onto. "Hey, want to meet the LAM pilots?"

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As the company car left the site, Hiroyuki Fukuda felt more at ease.

Interacting with his son-in-law was still a tense, and frustrating affair (he understood well enough how the scientist had that effect on relatively saner people) but it was a productive journey. "These mercenaries are interesting," he had to admit. He had come to Hakone with the natural disdain towards the *gaijin* invaders. He had not expected them to be competent and possessing honor of their own. "Miriya Parina was most impressive."

"I noticed." Prof. Rei replied, yawning. He gestured with his hands. "Her breasts are out to here."

Fukuda chuckled lightly. "Even you are not that obtuse."

Dr. Nanbara snorted. "*Men*."

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**Cafeteria, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Massachusetts, United States, Earth
1 May 2007/3022**

"Hey, I finally had a chance to look at the specs for that 'Point Eight' armor you guys are making," Belle Frye said around a mouthful of pizza. Belle had always loved pizza, and she had sorely missed it when she had left Terra for a "short term assignment" to Columbus as a materials engineer. The base cook had also been a health food fanatic. Coming to Earth was like coming home... in more ways than one.

"Really? That's good," Josh Goldberg replied. He was a materials engineer too here at MIT getting retrained on all the new science technology to keep his knowledge from becoming obsolete. And for an early twenty-first century primitive barbarian, he was cute too, in Belle's opinion. "So have you figured out what we've been doing wrong?"

"Sorry," Belle said, shaking her head. She swallowed her current mouthful of food before speaking further. "I dunno what you guys are doing wrong. The material looks exactly like the standard armor. Maybe if I had an actual sample to look at..."

"I'll see what I can do," Josh told her. "Not that I expect much. I think the suits think that you already have too much on your plate." He eyed her meal and smirked. "And I don't mean your lunch either."

Belle chuckled at that. Josh was fun, too!

"Tell me about it," Belle said. "How do you make room temperature superconductors? 'How do you scale up production of crystalline polymers?' 'How do you Ragnarok-proof everything?' I swear, I feel like I'm in one of those ISOT novels that you guys like so much."

"You are in one of those ISOT novels," Josh returned, wagging a finger at her. "Only it's not a novel and the genre is popular because it actually happened to us."

"Yeah, put that way, it doesn't make work look so bad," Belle agreed with a shiver. No one had yet to determine the cause, but with theories ranging from industrial accident in yet another universe to 'Alien Space Bats', each theory was simply more unsettling than the rest. A fifty lightyear radius of space shifted through time and space for no apparent reason? Could it happen again? Was it happening all the time without anyone noticing? The only consensus Earth could come up with was that since Earth was the apparent epicenter of the phenomenon, it *couldn't* have been natural.

Belle cut off that thought. It was just too unsettling to think about. She decided to bring the subject back to the original topic.

"So about those armor specs," Belle said, taking another bite of her pizza. "I did notice that they were incomplete."

"Incomplete?" Josh asked, puzzled.

"Yeah. How are you spacing the layers?" Belle asked.

"Spacing?" Josh repeated, a look of dawning realization slowly creeping across his face.

"You know, spacing?" Belle said. She put a hand over the pizza slice in her hand, holding it just a few millimeters from touching it.

"Standard armor is made in layers held a few micrometers apart at most. This helps prevent armor penetration by..."

"...by having the outer layers absorb, deflect, and/or shed the bulk of the energy of weapons fire while minimizing the amount being transferred to the layers underneath," Josh finished. "Damn! We know this! Hell, we've made stuff like this! We just never applied it on such a tiny scale before! That's why the stuff can bounce off high velocity APDFS rounds while lower velocity impact collisions can do more damage even if both carry the same amount of kinetic energy, right?"

"Pretty much," Belle confirmed. "Armor piercing sabots like the ones you guys used try to do all their damage at once. That doesn't work so good for modern armor; the outer most layer just soaks up all the impact energy. To defeat modern armor, you need to spread your

damage out over time, hence the use of burst fire autocannon, long duration lasers, and what you guys call 'missile spam'."

"Or really strong explosions, or single 'soft' rounds that will flatten themselves on impact instead of bouncing off," Josh added. He whistled in awe. "You know, we're going to have to retool our production lines again?" He chuckled. "Yeah, I can just hear the bureaucrats screaming about the expense now..."

"But we just spent boatloads of money on this!" Belle mocked with a laugh.

"Ha, yeah," Josh agreed. He looked at Belle funny. "So, um, are you doing anything later?"

Fort Irwin
California, Earth
24 Mar 2007

After stepping out of a taxi in freshly pressed, unadorned khakis, Thomas Jerald O'Malley, until relatively recently a Captain in the 11th ACR (Armored Cavalry Regiment), squinted at the harsh desert terrain. After a look around, he put his slouch hat on and slipped the strap under his chin. "Nice to be home," he muttered to himself as he settled the duffel bag on his back after retrieving it from the taxi's trunk, and headed for the base gate.

Major Staedele's office

Standing at all of 178cm and 88kg, the wiry man standing at attention before Major Staedele wasn't all that special. Or, at least, nothing special until one looked into his hazel eyes, where one who knew what to look for could find the look of someone who's been around the block a few times.

"Normally I'd have a subordinate do this, but the timing of this application makes that impractical." Major Staedele added, a moment later, "At ease."

O'Malley dropped into Parade Rest position. "My apologies for that, but there were... personal issues that couldn't be rescheduled or delayed. They have no bearing on my application other than its timing, however."

"I see. Mr. O'Malley, the record in your personnel file is, in general, well above average. The only point that may be an issue, as far as I can see, is a barely passing pistol qualification score. You may be seeking to be an artilleryman, but *everyone* in the Cav has to meet basic self defense requirements, including with pistols."

"Yes, sir, I'm aware of that. Gimme a few rounds of practice, and I can drop arty shells on the X all day long, even with a gun I've never even *seen* before and with nothing but a slip-stick and a plotting board. I've never been good at pistols, though, and not for a lack of trying. I

never bought into the notion that because I'm a cannon cocker I don't have to worry about Murphy biting me in the ass. As the old saw goes, 'shit happens'."

Staedele nodded. "Good attitude. Let's set that aside for the moment, and go to the next subject: why did you leave the service when you did? From what I see in your file, it seemed you were advancing pretty well by US Army standards, according to discussions I've had with others on base."

"At the time my parents were having a bit of a rough spot, with dad having a lot of lung trouble, and after pounding the UIR I didn't see anything else worth sticking around for. Unfortunately, that meant I missed out on China, but cannon cockers weren't really in demand in that war. After I left the service, I moved closer to Chicago to help them out where I could. Then your former associates showed up." The rest of his explanation was in a cold tone totally devoid of emotion. "A mech reactor going up destroyed the hospital wing where my dad was recovering from surgery, and a collapsing building trapped my mom bad enough that they couldn't dig her out before she ran out of air."

"I... see. My condolences on your loss. You're not looking for revenge, are you? Buron Cav may not be loaded with rulebook-hugging martinets, but we *do* insist on our personnel being professionals. Vengeance is not 'professional'." *But combining business with pleasure is an option*, Staedele mentally added.

O'Malley shook his head. "No, not at all," the tone of his reply back to normal. "The responsible parties are dead. Even if they weren't, making them so wouldn't change anything." Left unmentioned by the former captain was *how* some of those responsible wound up dead. Some of those invaders killed died after they were captured, in 'accidents' before prisoner duty was taken over from the Illinois National Guard troops. He hadn't been involved in that, but he could have been.

"Good. Now tell me why we should hire you. Sell me." Staedele leaned back in his chair, giving the former Army officer his undivided attention.

After only moment's pause, O'Malley called up the sales pitch he had planned prior to the meeting, just in case such a situation arose. "You need a cannon cocker that can speak both Arty and NATO when interacting with GDI forces, as well as do a good job on the tubes. I was practically raised on the stuff, so it's instinctual for me. There won't be a moment's pause to remember the proper phrasing that won't get your message blown off as being from an idiot. With the losses your non-mech forces took against the Combine, you need someone who's seen the elephant, as it were. Someone who won't soil their shorts when Charlie inevitably dances the Foxtrot, giving the gun crews someone to look to when they see a cloud of dust thrown up by the brigade of heavy mechs charging towards their position, and not panic because they know there are people with them that have been there, done that. People who not only survived to tell the tale of when three armored corps came charging at them, but can tell it with a grin that says 'fuck you' to the world. I *have* 'been there, done that', and once familiarized with the Cav's way of doing business I can backstop your own vets when they're babysitting the new meat who've not previously seen anything more violent than a bar brawl or a mugging. People who don't lose their heads in a crunch while the rest of the world is going batshit insane are worth their weight in... well, brass, at least. That's me."

The major considered the person before him for a few seconds. "You practiced that beforehand, didn't you?" Staedele chuckled. "You don't have to answer that."

He brought his chair upright, looking into O'Malley's eyes. "Let me tell you what, Mr. O'Malley. I *do* need people who won't 'soil their shorts when Charlie inevitably dances the Foxtrot', as you put it, and an artillerist that speaks GDI does have value. I'm still concerned about your pistol aim, though. The Cav holds to a higher standard for pistol quals than does the Army, and I'm not in the habit of giving people exceptions just because they have a skill that's useful to me. I'm *especially* not in the habit of giving them to people with whom I've not worked previously. With that in mind, you're in provisionally, provided you prove to me that you can meet all the qualifications. Since you are starting from scratch with the Cav, you can forget about your captain's bars, or any commissioned officer's rank. You'll

be starting at the bottom with everyone else. In the future, you might gain a commission in the Cav if you bust ass, but it wouldn't be any time soon. Will this be a problem for you?"

"Not at all," the now *very* former captain said in response. "I figured I'd be coming in at the bottom if you accepted me, and I'm fine with that as long as I'm given the chance to come up from there."

Staedele nodded. "Good. Talk to the Lieutenant in the next room about assignment to the recruit barracks. Training starts at oh-five-thirty sharp Monday morning. You probably already know this, but don't bring half your house with you. Even that bag," with a nod to the duffel bag sitting by the door, "is too much. The Lieutenant has the details for you about getting your kit." He rose to his feet, and extended his hand to the other man. "Provided you meet the pistol quals - I doubt the rest will prove problematic - welcome to Buron Cavalry, Recruit O'Malley."

"Thank you, sir," the new recruit replied as he reached over to accept the handshake.

"Oh, and Recruit? This time it's acceptable because I told you to make a sales pitch, but if you give me fertilizer like that again, it had better be because I've flipped my lid and have decided to become a farmer." The admonition was delivered with a grin. "I've talked with General Diggs. Your arty was never seriously threatened by the Army of God, nor were all three Corps heading for your position. Dismissed."

After having come to attention, the new recruit turned to depart.

IOC, Arrival & ROM, DC at Earth

London, England
Earth, Granville Cluster
29 January 2007

"The International Olympic Committee released a news statement today addressing the petition to allow the world of Antallos to participate in the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. They rejected the petition on three grounds. First, that Antallos does not have any form of professionally organized sporting events recognized as an Olympic Sport, thus it is unlikely that they would be able to field a proper team within the next 18 months.

"Secondly, the City-State of Port Krin is not a sovereign state, currently under the purview of a military governorship by the Coalition. The IOC reiterated that self-determination is a requirement in order to be a representable nation at the Olympics.

"Lastly, the GDI still has a limit on the transportation space between Port Krin and Earth, as well as security concerns about the location of our world.

"The IOC has reserved judgement on possible participation in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics at this time. They have also rejected a public petition to include Battlemech gladiatorial combat in future Olympics.

"In economic news, the OPEC Nations are facing a continuing crisis under the new leadership of Secretary General Abdallah Salem el-Badri. With the announcement by General Electric America of the first civilian Fusion Electrical Power Plant to begin construction in New York State within 12 months (pending approval by the Atomic Energy Commission), the price of crude Oil dropped to \$19.50US per barrel. This is the latest in a long series of decreases in the value of that natural resource, leading many economic speculators to believe that the OPEC economies will face recession or depression in the coming decade. Similar ventures in India, Brazil, China, Russia, South Africa and Japan are predicted to drive the price of crude oil down

further.

"In related news, the stock prices for General Motors and Toyota rose today with the announcement that the two companies would separately develop and begin manufacturing of a larger series of Electric, Hybrid and Electric Fuel Cell vehicles. Both companies cited a projected surplus in electricity in the coming decades, as well as economic pressures in their decisions. Rick Wagoner, Chairman and CEO of General Motors thanked Toyota for the competition during his press conference yesterday, thinking that the massive cooperative projects seen in the past 6 months by various companies as a bad thing for the long term economies of the involved corporations.

"On to Weather. The massive Cold Wave in southern Asia continues unabated this week, with forecasters not seeing any sign of an end to this unusual weather pattern. In Northern Europe, a severe wind storm warning is still in effect, in conjunction with the unusual heat wave coming off the North Atlantic. In North America, the economic damage from the mid-January Ice Storm is still being tallied, and is expected to reach \$1 Billion US.

"This is the BBC Hourly News. Please stay tuned for our next programme..."

Antallos Jumpoint

02 February 2007/3022

Space bent, warped, and broke, leaving behind a half-dozen jumpships, all bearing the heraldry of the Draconis Combine. The GDI jumpship that patrolled the point returned the signal announcing their arrival, not that such was needed as ComStar had delivered a message earlier in the week that the convoy was one jump out.

Ulysses Kurita watched as the bridge crew of his dropship made final preparations to separate from the jumpship and head in-system. 4 days transit, then he would once again put his feet onto the soil of this interesting world. On the decks below him, a ROM agent carefully hid the evidence of their actions. Opening a supposedly sealed container, the Agent damaged certain particular pieces of valuable machinery under the guise of making sure the cargo was ready for

acceleration.

The Agent was unsettled by the necessity of damaging such precious technology, but recognized that only into the service of the Word would this machine reach its fullest potential. And these Motherloaders were not followers of Blake. How could they be? No, better to show them the error of their ways when they falsely use these machines. Let them be punished for their sins.

Afterall, it's not like they would look inside a supposedly sealed device, to see through the casing of the machine, one clearly labeled 'Do not Open'.

Faith and Trust

**Non Standard Jumpoint, Wallacia, Free Worlds League
Mid Febuary, 2007**

An allergy. That was the final prognosis from the Doctor as to the cause of death. David was miserable as the impromptu casket was escorted into the airlock. The deceased was the only other proper civilian in the Tomb Raider expidition. And now he was dead, headed for an unmarked grave, a burial inside a star.

Daniel wanted to get a drink, throw up, and sleep - hoping to wake safe at home; all in no particular order.

The normal party to decide the new name of their Jumpship and Dropship (the first such party had taken place after they had left the OWA for the Federated Suns) had been put on hold when the deceased had fallen ill during supper. Apparently, one of the fruits had caused a reaction that there simply wasn't time to counter. A shot of Epinepheran had done nothing, and the poor man had been pronounced dead within the hour.

The next day, the Samurai announced the new name for their Jumpship. No longer the *Avante Garde* or the *Hail Mary*, she would be called *Hope for Tomorrow*.

**Nadair Jump Point
Sol System, Granville Cluster**

13 February 2007

The GDI jumpship snapped into existence, and within milliseconds, it had sent out a coded IFF pulse, and received a secure confirmation that they were who they were, and were where they were supposed to be. Weapon systems disarmed, preventing the jumpship from being engulfed in nuclear fire. All this in the time it took for the Captain of the jumpship to look down from the main viewscreen to his command chair at the Green light that signaled their safety.

This was lost on the passengers of the refitted Union *Olympus*. When she first came to Earth, she had been fitted to carry a lance of Mechs, and plenty of loot. Now she was meant to ferry about important people for the CSN. Today, her passengers were a dozen representatives of the Draconis Combine - diplomats, a couple lawyers, as well as three guards.

The diplomatic party were briefed on what came next though. Because the distance from the jumppoint to Motherlode was ten days at standard acceleration (a lie they had no reason to doubt), they would transfer to another jumpship for the last leg of the Circuit. They noted that normally dropships would simply cruise in, but they had freed up the Jumpship *Emerald City* to ferry them to a Pirate Point closer to Earth. It would be less than a day from there, cutting two off the total travel time.

Within half an hour, the dropship had switched jumpships, and vanished towards the distant star. The left-behind jumpship deployed its sail, and waited for the arrival of its next load of passengers and equipment bound for Antallos.

lessons

May 10, 2007

RWTH Aachen, Germany, Grantville Cluster

The Star League Engineer looked into the auditorium and his audience. Those weren't his usual students. Those were engineers and scientists with decades of professional experience.

Being a good and honest engineer, he realized he was a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants. And some of those giants - or at least alternate identities of them - could be in this room at the RWTH Aachen. Or in any other room on any University around the globe. He and his colleagues had taught in Beijing, Tokyo, Paris, Mumbai, the MIT, Oxford and countless other universities, teaching the locals how to use the scientific data he took for granted best. Today, it was in Germany. But it didn't matter as the lecture was seen on every single university on Earth and at literally millions of home computers on the global Datanet the locals called "internet". It would be saved and repeated an unimaginable number of times.

The persons in this audience had designed cars, airplanes, tanks, power plants, and lots of other things - even spacecraft - with tools being just a little short of the stone age when seen by a Star League Engineer. He was full of respect for them, but he knew they believed in utterly outdated theories and while those might include fresh ideas, it was his job to update their basics.

And they were willing to learn. There were dozens of questions after every lecture. His colleagues in material sciences had been answering questions for hours with manufacturers, of cars, airplanes and spacecraft patiently waiting for their time to ask.

He stepped onto the stage and cleared his throat.

"Guten Abend meine Damen und Herren" his German was a bit rusty, but it was enough for this greeting "Good evening ladies and Gentlemen." He activated a holoprojector showing schematics.

"This was the most common civilian fusion reactor for cars when I was frozen. In the same series, there was a bigger surface-ship plant as well as a civilian aircraft reactor." the schematics changed

accordingly "None of those includes the excessive shielding the successor states use or will be able to run for centuries, but they are cheap, reliable and easy to produce."

Oval Office
White House, Washington DC
Earth, Grantville Cluster
3rd May 2007

Jack Ryan Sr had ever since the first Spheroid Pirate invasion of New Zealand heard many schemes, proposals, plans and projects that many in his own administration had dreamed up, including some that filtered through the various alphabet soup agencies. Most of the ideas had concrete benefits, that he could see would work out long-term, and had gotten his stamp of approval and bumped around to the rest of the CSN Head of States. Some were good ideas, but not entirely practical. Others were the equivalent of political nitro-glycerine that could threaten to divide the very new CSN even before it properly got off the ground – off-world colonization policy was such an issue for example, especially in light of the Outer Space Treaty; while they ignored the nukes in space bit, everything else was still firmly being adhered to, especially the clause that prevented any government (singular) from claiming a celestial resource such as the Moon or a planet, since it was the *Common heritage of mankind*!. The Treaty said nothing of a supra-national government or agency though, like the CSN and GDI.

From his seated position on the couches surrounding the Seal of the President, Jack stared at the two people standing beside an easel with chart diagrams explaining their proposal. He stomped down on his first reaction; which was to blurt out '*This can't possibly work outside of fiction.*' but a President didn't say such things to his Science Advisor and a top tier DARPA scientist. Not especially when fiction had indeed turned to reality. In addition he knew his Science Tsar well enough; and the fifty two year old man would most certainly not be wasting his President's time with nonsense.

"This is actually feasible?"

Dr Stephen Young, PhD in aeronautics, astronautics and plasma physics, current Director of the Presidential Office of Science and Technology Policy nodded earnestly, "Oh yes, Mr. President. Casaba Howitzer's theoretical work was started in the Sixties when the

military advisors to Project Orion noticed that if you could make the plasma burst a little faster and with a narrower spread, it would no longer be a propulsion system. It would be a directed energy weapon of a magnitude that would dwarf any reusable 'cannon' -style system."

Jack nodded in understanding but asked, "Okay, so instead of having a propulsion system that is essentially a shaped nuclear charge under a tin can, now you're proposing we use that shaped charge to shoot at an enemy?"

"We're using the nuke to get the energy to blast a mass of Lithium or Potassium plasma at them, Mr. President."

"I see," Jack nodded. "So this, the Bomb Pumped gamma-ray laser and the FusionT weapon is what you propose to close the gaps in the Nuclear Shield?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Dr Kemp's proposal..." Dr Young nodded to his rather attractive fellow scientist; who was standing on the other side of the easel in a woman's suit, looking highly professional but her face showed her nervousness of being in the 'Office' and meeting with the Boss. "...is the only viable solution we see to the problem of an enemy jumping into the Solar System with prior knowledge of our Nuclear Gauntlet and equipping large amounts of Laser based AMS systems."

It was not a common known fact to the man in the street that a standard nuclear weapon detonated in space was actually far from the iconic mushroom clouds that had burned itself into the minds of people since the first one was detonated over Hiroshima. With no air medium around the weapon, in a vacuum a nuke needed to contact detonate against a ship hull to destroy it for sure. If it missed and went off just a mere one kilometer from the target (a tiny relative distance in space) then the weapon would just singe the paint and perhaps blind the targets' sensors for a time.

Then you had to factor in a ship equipped anti-missile systems that blasted away with Small Lasers at ranges well beyond a kilometer and while Spheroid targeting computers didn't even come close to

passing muster against their Earth counterparts, it would still require firing dozens of nukes at a ship to score a kill. That figure went up into the hundreds when going against a prepared opponent.

Jack thought for a moment and then nodded firmly, "Okay, you've both sold me on Casaba and the long-term goal of a bomb pumped Graser. However, I'm a bit leery of the idea of turning a Dropship engine into a weapon – it's an extremely double-edged sword."

"In that our Spheroid enemies could imitate it relatively quickly once we've used it against them," Dr Young agreed. "Mr. President, I advise that the Fusion Torch weapon, if successful, should only be deployed within the Solar System on ODPs, and even then is fired as a weapon of last resort. The Casabas and Grasers are to be issued to ODPs and our future warships and battlecarriers, but again are only to be used if the ship and/or colony in question have exhausted all other avenues of defence."

Jack sat back in the soft couch and shook his head ruefully, "We're going to end up with MAD eventually, except on an interstellar scale."

Dr Young didn't bother to point out that it had been Mutually Assured Destruction that had kept the West and Warsaw Pact from ever considering turning the Cold War into a hot one, and ensured a lasting 'peace' that had resulted eventually in the current relatively stable political climate on Earth. Jack Ryan knew this as surely as the man knew how to tie his shoelaces. "DARPA has taken that into account, Mr President."

Jack raised his eyebrows, feeling intrigued, "Oh?"

Young turned to the woman who had done the watered down technical part of the presentation for the President, "Dr Kemp?"

Dr Evangeline Kemp cleared her throat nervously, "Mr. President, DARPA has not been approaching this from just a perspective of us developing the weapons. We've also established a counter-project team, whose job is to develop methods and technologies from defending against Casabas, Grasers and FusionT weapons."

Jack frowned, "I'm sorry, Dr Kemp, but with the capabilities of Casaba and others...how would our future ships defend against that?"

"Casaba is a mass of plasma travelling at extremely high velocity; you need to hit it before it can detonate. We hope to eventually produce a Casaba that can accurately hit a ship a thousand kilometres from the point of detonation. To counter we could adapt the Star League Barracuda Missile and its relevant Launchers; develop a means to extend its range even further beyond nine hundred kilometres – this could be done by developing a small FusionT engine, attach our latest guidance and sensor packages, vectored thrust and theoretically we've extended the Barracuda's range as much as we can squeeze reaction mass inside it for propulsion."

Jack understood, "Essentially an anti-missile missile for space."

"Yes, Mr. President, they're also working on achieving the Beyond Light-second range goal for ship mounted Lasers and PPCs. With our superior optics and computers, especially with quantum state IT soon to be introduced we are already on our way to that end."

"We will eventually be able to hit a ship at an extreme stand-off range that no Spheroid faction or Clan will be able to match, Mr. President," Dr Young concluded.

"The counter-project team is also researching the idea of the Blue Shield Particle Field Dampener for our future warships."

Jack blinked, he was not sure he had heard that right, "Shield?"

Dr Kemp grinned and shook her head, "It's not a 'Shield' in the Star Trek sense, Mr. President. It's a system that cuts down significantly on the damage a PPC can inflict; by dampening the incoming ions that the PPC beam is throwing into the target. This system will have to be developed from scratch though; we will have to wait until New Dallas Expedition returns with the Star League Core to aid us in development."

"Even with that, it's not a sure thing," Dr Young argued. "Blue Shield

will not be developed for another thirty one years, according to the sourcebook timeline. All we have is the idea, and no practical starting point of even where we should begin to experiment. I think we would be better off focusing on the Cold Plasma Defense Shield."

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose wearily, he was probably going to regret asking this, "Which is...?"

Young explained, "Sorry, Mr. President. Cold Plasma is exactly what its name implies; plasma that exists at room temperature and not at the sun hot temperatures that are normally found in fusion reactor plasma. Several years ago, the first practical techniques were developed to generate large quantities of the low-temp plasma. The Air Force has picked up the tab for the research as it had great potential to protect and hide satellites if they were enveloped in a field of this cold plasma."

Jack was baffled, "How would a bubble of cold plasma hide an entire satellite of all things?"

"Mr. President, this plasma can be made into a kind of energy absorber, pulling in incoming electromagnetic waves, such as those emitted from ground-based radars, and dissipating them. With enough power and density, the plasma could also serve as a disposable barrier to Laser and PPC fire."

Kemp shook her head. "Cold Plasma Shielding, *in theory*, can deflect both varieties of directed energy weapon attacks – but there is no guarantee we could tune the plasma frequency high enough to do that...there's also no way we could practically envelop an entire warship or jumpship with the shield. It would also effectively blind the ship's sensors..."

Dr Young was incredulous. "You can't be suggesting we throw CP out the window?"

"Not at all, it's a technology with good potential, but combat and logistical conditions will make it impractical for protecting warships against directed energy weaponry. I can see it being used to aid other weapons in performing their jobs better; keeping dust off laser optics

for instance, stealth, the rapid decontamination of clothing, equipment or personal gear..."

Dr Young was about to retort, but Jack interrupted the potential argument and stood from the couch, "Regardless of either the Particle Dampener and Cold Plasma's viability or their potential applications, I can see the advantage and the need to develop *both* technologies and leverage them well. Consider your entire project green-lighted, I'll run it by the CSN for further funding and support to be thrown your way."

Both scientists inadvertently chorused, "Thank you, Mr. President."

Jack shook Evangeline's hand, "You've got a lot of work ahead of you Dr Kemp, and I suggest you get started."

The determination was clear in her voice, "We won't disappoint, Mr. President."

"Have a good day, Mr. President," Dr Young promptly ushered the DARPA scientist out.

March 24th 3022
Fort Irwin, California

Major Staedele took a look through the door inside the newly built hangar. After his return, he had found out that Ft Irwin had been considerably expanded since his departure for Antallos, mostly to give the newly formed GDI units more training space. Incidentally, that had also allowed the Pentagon to reserve a small part of the installation for permanent use of the Buron Cav, which, as an official had explained, was the most sensible thing to do, given the long duration of the contract between the mercenary unit and the United States. That these building were just about the farthest from the main gate of any building in the entire installation was, of course, not exactly a coincidence.

Through the door, he watched the crowd of several hundred people inside. "Quite a few more than we expected", he remarked towards the gathered 'inner circle' of the Buron Cavalry. Nedeljko, Johnson, Hinze (now kicked up to Lieutenant) and, of course, his wife and aunt were all present.

"No kidding", Johnson answered, "I didn't expect so many to show up, either."

"Ditto," Nedeljko threw in. "Let's not let them wait any longer, shall we. Lead the way, oh our fearless commander", he said with a smirk.

"Okay, here goes", Staedele quipped before walking through the door with the rest of the group in tow. He went directly towards the small wooden stage that had been erected at one end of the building, noticing how the entire room went quiet upon noticing the presence of the newcomers. As he reached the stage, he took a look at the gathered crowd. From what he could see, there were men and women from all kinds of ethnicities and of many different ages gathered, though most of them looked to be in their twenties or early thirties. He cleared his throat and began his speech, speaking in a hard, military tone.

"I am Andreas Staedele, commanding officer of the Buron Cavalry

mercenary unit. Of course, you should already know this. All of you are here because you applied to the job advertisements placed upon our website directly after the ratification of the Reykjavik Accords. You want to become members of our unit. In the next four weeks, we will put you through a training program that will make sure that only the best of you will get one of the limited number of places we have open at the moment. Whether you applied to be an infantryman, an artilleryman or a tech does not make a difference. You will all go through this process.

Now, I know that some of you might have overly romantic illusions about what they can expect from being a member of a mercenary command. So, just to address such expectations, let me be frank: The career you are applying for here will be hard. It will be hard, dangerous and often unrewarding. You might spend years, if not decades, separated from your families and your homes. You might die on one of the thousands of god-forsaken backwaters out there and hardly anyone might notice. Just another dead merc nobody cares about. And quite likely, your daily routine will require more of you than many other jobs.

Additionally, it should be noted that while the discipline inside a mercenary unit might be considered lax compared to the military in many aspects, it will, if at all, be even stricter in other regards, so don't even think that it will be easy going. Just for an example, you will find out that neither me, nor any other of the officers you will be serving under will have any kind of patience with anyone attempting to discriminate another human because of their race, gender, religious beliefs and so on. There will be no place for bigots in my unit.

Last, but not least: By signing the contract that makes you a member of our unit, you will effectively sign away a great deal of your personal rights and freedoms for the duration of the contract. You will be expected to carry out the orders of your superior officers and you will be subject to the laws and regulations of both the unit and our employer at all times.

You can also expect the following:", the Majors voice became a bit softer at that. "If you become a member of this unit, we will look

after you. We will care. We will treat you much like family. No matter the situation, if you have a problem, you will be able to go to the rest of the unit and we will help you to the best of our ability. Nobody gets left behind or thrown under the bus in this unit as long as I draw breath. That is a promise."

He paused for a few seconds before continuing in the previous manner. "Many of you already had military training. Others did not. This will not play a role in the upcoming course. For the first week, all of you will be going through a series of physical tests as well as learning how to use basic firearms. For the remaining three weeks, you will be split up and trained in the respective areas you have applied for. This training will be hard. We will try and get you right up to the edge of what you are capable of and then we will judge you accordingly. If anyone of you wants to quit, he is perfectly welcome to turn to the nearest officer and declare it. In that case, you will pack your stuff, get a bus ticket to L. A. from us and then be escorted to the main gates of Ft Irwin.

I hope you understood what I explained to you right now. All of you will now be escorted to the administration building in which you will sign the contract for this probation and be given your basic gear and directions to your barracks. From then on, you will be under the care of Captain Johnson."

Staedele paused for a second to let it sink in.

"And before I forget it: Welcome to the Cav.

Dismissed."

April 3rd, 3022
Fort Irwin, California
11:50 local time

The bang of an artillery gun firing momentarily shattered the almost tranquil silence of the Mojave Desert. It was the third day of the specialised training. A bit more than half the applicants had decided to carry on after the Majors speech and the first week of being

brought to the edge in the mandatory self-defence training that everyone in the Buron Cavalry, even the techs, had to run through.

Major Staedele, accompanied by his Co-pilot, lieutenant Reed, was moving towards the guns arrayed for another exercise of the new artillerymen.

"That was nicely done, Lieutenant. You scared the crap out of the new guys. You're learning."

The gun thundered again.

"Thanks, Major," Lieutenant Reed answered. During the morning training, both of them, riding *Altes Eisen* had participated in the first practical anti-Mech training lesson for the applicants. The Major had been content on giving his co-pilot full control over the Mech to further train the Lieutenant. The exercise itself had not been much a challenge, though. BlueFor, consisting of two platoons of applicants, had been brutally mauled by the Warhammer. They had committed a number of fatal beginner mistakes and paid for it with a rather humiliating defeat.

Coming close enough to the guns and the group of people assembled in front of a small table by the vehicle, the Major gave a wave towards the newly promoted Lieutenant Hinze, who was busy teaching the prospective artillerymen. The Lieutenant stopped pointing out things on what appeared to be a map of the region and saluted. Seeing this, the assembled class turned around and hastily saluted the CO of the Buron Cavalry.

He returned the salute before addressing the LT. "Lieutenant, would you mind me interrupting your lesson? It's almost time for noon break anyway."

Hinze, all the professional, answered: "No problem, sir." Then, he turned towards the assembled crowd. "You heard the Major. You can thank him for extending your break by a few minutes. Dismissed."

And on that signal, the class dispersed at a verily astonishing speed. As such, the Major did not have to wait long before turning towards

Hinze again.

"So, Eduart, what do you think about your newcomers?"

"Well, boss, most of them already know the basics of gunnery and running a SPG, so much of my training will be concentrated on our specific equipment. I already picked out a few promising candidates that seem to learn faster than the rest, but the competition is wide open. Overall, this seems to work out pretty well. There is one thing that bugs me, though."

At this, the Major raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"They're a bit too trusting in their toys. Yes, those new targetting systems we managed to get for the Thumpers are bloody marvelous, but I have people in this class that aren't capable of quickly computing a firing mission without those technological gadgets. Damn boys were looking at me like I'm some kind of magician when I demonstrated a manually computed and entered firing missions. One of the guys flat out told me that it'd be impossible to do it that fast. He almost had his eyeballs popping out when the FO called in the second shot as a hit. Okay, that was lucky, but he wouldn't stop gawking even after I told him that I normally need about three shots. Hell, they make me feel like some wise *old* man! Like, one of those sensei figures out of these old movie flicks."

Grinning at that, the Major answered, "Not only you, Eduard, not only you. Some of the PBIs were just standing there with their jaws agape when Marc and his squad showed them a good anti-Mech attack. Well, they and Lieutenant Reed here when he realised just how much he had been had. Right?"

Slightly embarrassed, the Lieutenant answered with a rather silent "Yes, sir."

Staedele continued, "But for all that's holy, try getting them to be able to do it without aid as well as you can. Those 'gadgets', as you call them, might be bloody marvelous, but they're also bloody fragile and we can't afford a gun being unable to hit a target and hit it fast just because part of the new electronics have a bad day."

"Will do, sir, will do. Now, I think it's time to go to the canteen. Trying to teach newcomers how to do artillery the old way is hard work. You coming?"

"You bet, Eduard."

Thirty minutes later

The canteen was slowly emptying as the noon break for the trainees came to its end. Sitting at one end of the hall, Major Staedele was discussing a whole slew of things with his wife.

"The newcomers? From what I've seen they're pretty good in quite a few areas, but sorely lacking in many others. Not one of them had seen a functioning energy weapon before yesterday and teaching them the finer points will take time. And the kind of intuition that makes a good tech is something you can't really teach. Ask me again in two weeks or so, dear. Oh well, for the afternoon, they're Dyer's problem. We two have an appointment with Esthers class teacher."

"Thanks, honey. I wonder why they want to talk to us. I haven't heard anything bad about Esther since we sent her and the other other kids on the bases' school. All the reports describe her as doing just fine, those few problems with the initial integration into the class set aside. Well, except for that first meeting when they were berating us over the way her education had gaps in subjects we never thought about teaching her." The Major shuddered. That had been an unpleasant day. And frankly, what use had a girl grown up in a mercenary units DropShip for detailed biology lessons, anyway? For the biology of a single planet, at that? Overall, he and Marie were more than happy for their kid to get the chance to get an education they would have never dreamed of, but some of the finer points still failed to make any sense.

With a frown, Marie answered: "From what I gather, they're not exactly happy about the fact that we're sending the kids to some extra lessons from Ms Avilés during the afternoon."

The Major simply sighed. This particular thing had been a matter of

conflict between him and the school since Day 1. And Filatov had continued the fight during his absence. "Well, it's not our fault that there's barely any certified teacher out there that can educate the kids on the technology, history and politics of the Inner Sphere. Especially after the bureaucrats are blocking any attempts of Silvia to become a bona fide teacher. I have the feeling that this talk will again end without any result."

"Yes, I think so, too. Especially as Esther and the kids wouldn't even want it to stop. They love Silvia. Hell, even the other kids in the kindergarten loved her when she was helping out last month. The only way you could get Esther to miss one of her lessons would be to buy her another new game for that Xbox."

"Heh, ain't that the truth? Not getting her to skip classes. She's growing so fast... I was almost shocked to see just how much she had grown up when we came back from Antallos."

"Me too, Andreas, me too. So, any more plans this week besides the training, or do we have some spare time for ourselves."

"Spare time, honey, spare time. Except for Friday afternoon. I finally managed to get an appointment to interview that Black Lightning guy. But otherwise, there's nothing this week."

Vatican

January 1, 2006/3021

Papal Office

Apostolic Palace, Vatican City

Earth, Grantville Cluster

Pope Benedict XVI. sat in his office and listened to William Joseph Levada, his successor in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He had already decided that the past tense was proper for referring to a future separate from their own.

"The sourcebooks say that Vatican City was occupied in 2770 AD in the Inner Sphere when Stefan Amaris conquered Earth. The papal successor, Pope Clement XX, sent out messages to the head Cardinals, on basically every major world, which gave them full control over their dioceses as long as Amaris controlled the territory of the Holy See. Amaris did not take this lightly and destroyed the city, as he did with other places like Mecca and Jerusalem."

"What do you mean, destroyed? How?"

"Nuclear, your Holiness."

Pope Benedict XVI looked outside, with the sunlight trailing in through colored glass windows. Beyond was Rome, all the hustle and bustle somehow stopping a bubble of quiet dignity that was the Vatican. Rome, the beloved and eternal city. History soaked through its roads, and he wondered how someone could so easily in a fit of pique destroy such a legacy? Rome has endured barbarians, its own rulers, and the march of science. Faith endured. He had no emotional connection to the history Levada was speaking, but Amaris and his many crimes against humanity was understandably unforgivable.

Though formerly Joseph Ratzinger, he understandably grown to love the city within a city that stands devoted to God. It was home. Once more threatened by barbarians on all sides. He said nothing but nodded, a signal for Levada to go on.

"As life never is that easy, the message to New Avalon, the capital of the Federated Suns, was corrupted... intercepted... changed, it does not matter. The ruling Cardinal of New Avalon, a Medici, thought he was put in charge of the whole Church and declared himself Pope Thomas X. This, of course, created a schism, especially as his successors implemented a lot of reforms that people wish. Female priests, no celibacy..."

"It's a pity that a man who thinks the Church has to bow to the zeitgeist of a single area had become cardinal." Benedict interrupted. "We surrender our entire beings to God, and to give way so easily is to erode the very pillars of faith and duty that grants us the trust of our flock. The zeitgeist changes. The Church is eternal." He paused, and looked up with a quirked expression. "A Medici? Really?"

"Apparently in this new... timeline... the influence of the Medici family is not as extinct as we had thought. It could simply be a new family trying to give themselves the veneer of legitimacy by evoking the old."

"It does not matter. What is done is done."

"Yes, Holy Father." Levada agreed curtly.

"Nonetheless, what about... more sane reforms? What about the Church that remains centered upon Terra?"

"I regret that we do not have information other than what is written in the books."

The Pope frowned. The Battletech source material were barely even literature, they should not be looked at as if holy writ that would reveal the mysteries of the universe. "I did not make you my successor just to study a few books. What about other sources of knowledge?" Benedict asked, changing the subject somewhat.

"We have not been granted access to the prisoners, but they are not exactly good Catholics anyway. The Church has weak presence in the Periphery, ignoring it much like the Successor Lords have done. We

require better sources. Earth will strike back to Antallos, the periphery pirate harbor that the invaders came from, in June or July." Levada reported as he flipped a page of the report in his hands. "There is still the possibility of failure, but it is likely that GDI will succeed. These elements will remain to perform peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts. A hub of transport and trade would provide better opportunities to gather such knowledge."

"We must know more, my child. See if we can send some of your men with them. We will be able to help in ways that are not dependent upon guns and coercion."

"Yes, Holy Father."

Benedict looked at Levada again searchingly before asking, "So Clement XX really was the last Pope?"

"No, your Holiness. Cardinal Viadimir Kosiv, of the People's Union of Kazkakh, was elected Pope John Paul V in 2779 of the... BT calendar."

Pope Benedict was an old man. For a moment he relaxed his control over his official dignity. He put both palms over his face and groaned. "Two Popes. It's the Middle Ages all over again, isn't it?"

"Exactly, Holy Father."

"So what exactly has been happening in the past... two hundred years, is it?"

"Two hundred and forty-two years, Holy Father. There have been many efforts to reconcile the rift, but all have failed. In the beginning, such failures happened with active help from House Davion, if we can trust the books. But it fits, they probably saw the New Avalon Catholic Church as a chance to draw support away from Terra and the League and to promote patriotism. On individual planets, the conflict between the two Churches was 'settled' with wars that make Northern Ireland look tame. Today, an uneasy truce exists between the two Churches, with each of the two seeing the other as being wrong and sending a Cardinal to each other every few years."

Compared to real life ecumenism, it is a futile and unsuccessful effort." Levada reported.

"The Churches of the Inner Sphere have allowed themselves to become tools of the Successor Lords." Pope Benedict hissed.

William Joseph Levada blinked and bowed. Even he had to admit, the Pope could pull off a very impressive villainous sneer. It was ironic that he was in reality a peaceful, solemn man.

"They have FAILED." Pope Benedict XVI spoke with grim finality. "They who should have acted to limit the rapacious greed of the Successor Lords. They who could have worked to shelter the downtrodden and enlighten the ignorant. They who should have been the succor of the helpless, the comfort of the afflicted, the last hope of the lost! They have failed their flock! They have failed their duties! They have spurned the holy and worthy toil granted them by GOD for their own meager survival!"

Levada kept his eyes downward. A Pope was the head of Roman Catholic Church, the steersman of the Faith. He was more than just a figurehead, but chosen for his convictions and the steel of his will.

"It would be most troublesome to embroil ourselves into that mess..." Pope Benedict added with a weary sigh. "But to take us from our time and into a different universe with such darkness, is nothing less than the will of our Lord made manifest. We have a responsibility to bring the flock together and save them from the wolves that surround them. We must know more. We must know, before we can act. We have a *duty*. We must not fail them, not again."

"Yes, Holy Father. Please be assured, we will do all that we can." Archbishop William Levada was an American Cardinal and the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The office he held, however, was once known as that of the Grand Inquisitor of the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition.

Special thanks to bluepencil and Trivia Freak which made this snippet into what it is

now. It might have been canceled otherwise.

April 3rd, 2007/3022
Fort Irwin, California
11:50 Lima

He returned the salute before addressing the LT. "Lieutenant, would you mind me interrupting your lesson? It's almost time for noon break anyway."

Hinze, all the professional, answered: "No problem, sir." Then, he turned towards the assembled crowd. "You heard the Major. You can thank him for extending your break by a few minutes. Dismissed."

And on that signal, the class dispersed at a verily astonishing speed.

Canteen

"I'm telling you, a hit on only the second round is nuts!" The chubby recruit who had been wowed by Lt. Hinze's landing a hit on only the second shot looked down at the tray with disgust. "Likewise expecting us to eat this slop. Back on the farm we wouldn't feed this to the pigs."

O'Malley rolled his eyes. "Which is why we're getting it. Army food isn't about taste, it's about calories, and fixing up food fast. Oh, the major and his regulars might eat a little better, depending on the mood of the food people, but they've earned it. We, on the other hand, are just raw meat." He had already decided to not try to argue in defense of Lt. Hinze's shot. It *was* luck, but luck is just as much a part of warfare as bullets and beans. He also declined to note that the recruit could stand to lose a few more pounds, beyond what the recruit training all applicants had to do had worked off.

Williams, the recruit in question, looked up at O'Malley with annoyance. "I ain't no 'raw meat', I've been doin' this for years now."

"Yeah, what, all two of them, in some backwater shithole that wouldn't merit the attention of even the worst pirate group in the history of the Inner Sphere?" O'Malley snorted.

The younger recruit scowled, and turned his attention back to his meal in silence, confirming O'Malley's suspicions on the subject.

"Scoop it down fast, so you don't have your taste buds give your gut any warning of the incoming fire. Ignorance really is bliss, in this case," O'Malley advised, before he put words to action for his own lunch.

With the relative quiet from O'Malley's mouth being full of food, and the apparent end of the conversation between him and Williams, another spoke up, a tiny little vaguely Asian looking woman who *maybe* massed 50kg soaking wet, and only in a pair of platform shoes could she top 150cm.

"Say, Tom, mind if I ask you a question?" After he nodded in the negative, she continued. "I heard some of the other Earthers here call you 'Alleycat'. What's up with that? Popular with the ladies or something?"

Years of experience with the general tone of the query was all that kept him from choking on the mouthful of mashed potatoes - or at least a passable facsimile of them - he had just put into his mouth. He swallowed, then turned to the inquisitive raven-haired woman. "Um, no. An unfortunate coincidence of naming with a character from a childrens' animated movie that came out shortly after I was born." With that, another forkful of the ersatz mashed potatoes was put into his mouth, hoping against experience that he could satisfy her curiosity with only that as his answer.

His apparent reluctance to continue was not, alas, enough to quench her curiosity. "Oh? What movie was that?"

O'Malley sighed, and mentally repeated his usual comment that it'd be nice if *someone* would let him leave his answer at what he had just said, breaking the zero-to-ungodly-large record. "'The Aristocats. The male protagonist was a feline named Thomas O'Malley. Yes, an alleycat. Not exactly a point of pride in my youth, and not much more of one in adulthood with those who had shown the film to their kids, or to kids they had babysat."

The answer was enough to set the woman giggling, and Williams to choking on his own food after a failed attempt to suppress a laugh. "So what about your middle name? Or do you not have one?" she asked.

"I do, but that's not much better, if a mite more obscure. I get seasick on an inflatable toy in a kiddie pool, how would I fly a chopper off a postage stamp of a landing pad on a frigate in the middle of a North Atlantic winter?" he asked rhetorically. "Larry Bond can burn in hell for all I care."

"Ooh, sore point I take it. Okay, I'll not press you on that one. But can you at least tell me the book?" She remembered seeing, at the PX, some books by a technothriller author of that name, so she at least knew he was a book author.

O'Malley sighed. "Red Storm Rising. Now, if you don't mind, our time's almost up, and there's still food to eat."

With that pointed message to drop the conversation, they went back to their lunch.

West Point, New York State
United States, Earth
Coalition of Sovereign Nations
9 May 2007

Sally Ryan ran the *Pheonix Hawk* she was piloting down the broad, tree-lined street, avoiding the abandoned cars choking the road as best she could. An enemy *Vindicator* stepped into an intersection ahead of her and raised it's gun arm at her. At the tell tale glow of its muzzle, Sally dodged to the side, just in time to barely avoid the PPC bolt that turned a tree into a fire ball.

Sally had no time to notice as she raised her weapons, and speared the *Vindicator* in the chest with her own mech's large laser. That made a nice little fireball, but hardly inconvenienced the other mech as only armor was blown off.

The range closed. More fire was exchanged. More armor was shed on both sides. But the hit rate was very much in Sally's favor, with the coupe de-grace delivered by a near judo kick that snapped what was left of the *Vindicator's* right leg off at the knee.

Sally was exultant, she was victorious... and she wasn't paying attention when an enemy *Cicada* whipped around a corner behind her and speared the back of her *Pheonix Hawk* with its own pair of lasers.

Everything went black.

With a hiss of equalizing pressure, the canopy of Sally's simulator pod popped open. The rather handsome Captain in charge of the sim looked down on her with a mixture of amusement and sympathy.

"Sorry, Miss Ryan," he said as he helped her out of the pod. "But you just got killed by ammo explosion."

White House, Washington DC
United States, Earth
Coalition of Sovereign Nations

10 May 2007

"So, how'd you do?" Jack Ryan Jr. asked eagerly.

"Better than I thought I did," Sally told her little brother. "I got told that my tactics need work, but that's why we have things like military academies." She picked up one of many pamphlets arrayed in front of her. "They even gave me an invitation to join the US military branch of my choice."

"Cool," Jack said, obviously green with envy. "But how'd you do in the sim? You get a good sync ratio?"

"Sync ratio" had become a well known term among the military and civilian mech fans on Earth. With the revelation that the *Battletech* franchise was based on reality, they had taken a good hard look at just what the technology entailed. Inner Sphere neurohelmet technology for example was required for piloting mechs, but it was an imperfect technology. Some people were simply better at using it than others, being able to synchronize their neural patterns better with what the neurohelmets were looking for. The very best ones almost didn't need manual controls at all, and Sally's little brother wanted to know where Sally fell into that spectrum.

"I dunno, Jack," Sally said slowly. She looked down at the pamphlets in front of her. There were a lot of them, and most weren't from military or even government institutions. "Should I really let one trait define my future here?"

"Sally..."

"Okay, okay," Sally laughed. She looked Jack in the eye and said, "Top 10 percentile."

"Huh, cool," Jack said, impressed. "So you're going to be a mechwarrior, right?"

"Maybe," Sally said doubtfully. "But I'm not really sure the military life is for me. Or hell, I'm not sure it's even the best use for my talents."

"What? Why wouldn't you want to be a mechwarrior?" Jack asked, confused. Then more slyly, he added, "What, don't you wanna be close to your boyfriend..." Sally whapped him with a brochure. "Hey! No physically abusing little brothers here!"

"Tony Dansel is not my boyfriend," Sally told him in exasperation. "Okay, I have... had a crush on the guy and he is easy on the eyes..."

"Ew!"

"...but I've only met the guy once! Once!" Sally said emphatically. She closed her eyes and sighed. "I'm never going to live that party down, am I?"

"Never!" Jack agreed. "But seriously, how come you don't want to be a mechwarrior? It's like the coolest job in the universe!"

"Is it?" Sally asked doubtfully. "Sure, sure, mechs are cool and all that, but I don't think blowing stuff up is what I want to do for the rest of my life."

"So what do you want to do?" Jack asked.

"I want to help people," Sally said. "Have you seen Sullivan's documentary on Port Krin? Better than half the Inner Sphere's like that and more mechwarriors aren't going to fix it. What the Inner Sphere needs are teachers and doctors and engineers, people we take for granted but which they have a severe shortage of. If I become one of those, at least I'll know I'm helping people."

Port Krin, Antallos
Coalition of Sovereign Nations
17 May 2007

Administrators came and went, regimes changed, but the Split Axe tavern endured. The coming of the GDI and the reforms they instituted did very little to interrupt business. Only these days, the clientele now included a good number of off duty GDI and Legion personnel. To the bemusement of the staff, the Split Axe's reputation

had somehow spread to Motherlode, attracting not a few tourists as well as military people.

Among the Split Axe's amenities were side rooms for hosting private parties. To Jane Koltan's amusement, the one rented by Major Burgess Hale happened to be the exact same one in which she had not two years ago briefed "Vorax's Army" on their target, Motherlode. Thinking about she and everyone else had thoroughly underestimated the resistance that they'd run into still gave her the shivers some times. It was a miracle that she had not only survived that day, but prospered.

But then again, so had everyone else here.

"So, here we are," Hale was saying to the assembled former pirate band of the Dropship *Drakon*. "Two years ago, we were a down on our luck pirate band barely making ends meet. Two years ago, we discovered what we thought was the biggest score of our lives. And I guess it was that, even if not quite the way we thought."

"Yeah, I heard you're rich now, Burg," Jane's husband, Irdon Koltan said. "Complete with a title and everything. Should we be calling you 'milord' now?"

"Please don't, Irdon," Hale replied with a roll of his eyes. "I've already heard every joke under the sun about that."

"You want I tell a few, sir?" Jankowski added. That was another change, Jane thought. Two years ago, Jankowski never would have called anyone 'sir'. 'Boss' maybe, but not 'sir'. And he looked better too; military discipline seemed to suit him. "I'm sure I've heard a few you missed."

"Don't you dare, Jankowski," Hale growled. That drew a chuckle from the others. "So what have you guys been up to?"

"Me? I've been up to my elbows in R and D," Dana Zumross said, waving a fork with a bit of steak on it. "I can't really talk about the particulars of what we're doing at the moment, but suffice to say that the Legion is due for a few upgrades in the coming months."

"Ah, you know what I've been doing," Jankowski said. "Lieutenant First Class Ken Jankowski, Legion Mech Ace extraordinaire!"

"Extraordinaire?" Zumross echoed. "Jankowski, have you been taking those correspondence courses?"

"What? I'm a great and mighty mechwarrior! I don't need no... stinking..." Jankowski trailed off under Zumross' stare. "Yes, I have," he admitted, embarrassed. "But don't you tell anyone!"

"Well good for you!" Zumross said approvingly.

"Huh, really?" Jankowski said, surprised. "So, uh, you doing anything later, Dana?"

"Yeah, I'm going to be meeting with my fiancé later," Dana told him, flashing the ring on her finger.

"Fiance... you're getting married?" Jankowski said, dumbfounded.

"So, Irdon, how have you been doing?" Hale asked, turning away from the chatting former lancemates.

"My lovely wife here has gone and gotten a commission in the GDI," Irdon said with pride, nodding in Jane's direction.

"Yeah, I kinda gathered that from the uniform," Hale said dryly, looking down at his own GDI uniform. "So, Jane, what is it exactly you do for the GDI?"

"Same old, same old," Jane replied with a shrug. "I specialize in Dropship operations. I actually used to teach Dropship operations, but I think I trained up enough people that they can take over. Now, the GDI is developing a new class of... well we can't exactly call them Dropships since they can't use Jumpship docking collars, but they're also too big to be called a shuttle or fighter and too small to be a Monitor."

"Yeah, I think I've read speculation about these things in the news,"

Hale said.

"Anyway, I'm on the team developing operational doctrine for them," Jane said. "You wouldn't believe how much work that requires given that practically nothing about the weapons load out has been finalized."

"Sounds like you got your work cut out for you," Hale observed. "And you, Irdon? How's 'Motherlode' treating you?"

"Okay, Burg," Irdon replied. "I'm doing... okay."

"What, no details?"

"Well, y'know how it is," Irdon sighed. "It's not like Earth actually needs another infantry commander after all."

"Oh, Irdon..."

"No, really, Burg, I'm good," Irdon insisted. "I'm better than good, actually. I was infantry and I like to think that I was good at being a grunt. But being a grunt was the best option out of a lot of bad ones. Earth's actually provided me with some good options."

"Such as?" Hale asked.

"Ah..." Irdon hesitated.

"Oh, go ahead and tell him, Ird," Jane told her husband. "You love your new job. It's nothing to be ashamed of!"

"I teach Inner Sphere history," Irdon mumbled.

"What?" Hale said, not quite certain that he had heard correctly.

"I teach Inner Sphere history, Burg," Irdon repeated more clearly. "Go ahead, laugh, but I happen to think it's important to know how we got where we are today. It's just as important as knowing math and chemistry and all the technical stuff that Earth has and the Inner Sphere's lost."

"Not laughing here, Irdon," Hale said seriously, holding up his hands in surrender. "In fact, working for the GDI, I like to think I have an inkling for how much everyone in the Inner Sphere's lost too. So what brings you to Antallos?"

"Irdon's got a job at the Tesla Institute," Jane announced proudly. Her husband nodded confirmation.

"The Tesla Institute, huh?" Hale said thoughtfully. "I guess if anyone tries to stage a raid on the place, it'll help to have a bad-ass ex-infantry commander on the staff." He looked around at his people and shook his head. "Amazing what a change of perspective Earth has been," he mused. "Two years ago, I *would* have laughed at the very idea of you becoming a school teacher, Irdon. Now..."

"Now, we get to do what we want to do," Irdon finished for him. "And what's more, we get the feeling that what we do *matters*, that we're contributing to the improvement of the human condition." He shook his head. "Two years ago, I never would have believed it possible."

"Except for those of us that didn't make it," Jane said sadly, her mind flashing back to that day. "Hugo Chin certainly should have lived to see all this."

"Tony Denaro," Hale added in agreement. "Not a bad guy. Shame he didn't join up with the GDI."

"I can think of quite a few people we lost when Mamoto lifted off with the *Drakon's* bay door wide open," Irdon said with a scowl. "Death by enemy action is one of the risks of the business. Death because people on your own side are idiots and cowards is personal!"

"So whatever happened to our former Dropship captain, anyway?" Hale asked.

"Last I looked, he was selling used cars in Los Angeles," Irdon answered in disgust. "And it looked like he was doing well too!"

"I guess Mamoto's prospering too," Hale mused aloud. "Or at least

found a job that better suited his talents." He stood up. "Everyone, I have something I'd like to say." Everyone looked at him expectantly. "Two years ago to the day, we found a Periphery world off the beaten track that looked like the answer to all our problems. And in a way, it was. All it required was for us to get our asses kicked by the locals."

That drew a few chuckles all around.

"So I propose a toast," Hale continued, holding up his wine glass. "To getting our asses kicked! The best thing that ever happened to us!"

"TO GETTING OUR ASSES KICKED!"

Port Krin Spaceport
Antallos
06 February 2007/3022

The Eight dropships descended towards the spaceport in an impressive display of synchronization and fireworks. The Combine vessels were being guided by beacons towards a secured portion of the port, where the welcoming committee was already waiting.

As part of that group, Colonel Kurita tugged at his collar in the heat. Tai-sa Ulysses had radioed ahead, asking for him to be there. General Davis had no objection, as it gave him more time to catch up on paperwork, so the GDI officer now waited for the Combine to arrive.

Beside him were Ambassadors Smith and Taro, the two making small talk while the Boeing/BMW representative, a German named Richter, paced nervously. He and his associates had only arrived a couple days previous, and they were still getting used to the local gravity and atmosphere. But they were satisfied with the production of the factory so far, and had made themselves at home in the apartment building set aside for them. Rounding out the party was Alicia Kurita, waiting to see her grandfather for the first time in months, as well as to be officially relieved as the commander of the Combine garrison on-world.

The droppers landed, and they waited in silence while the heat from the engines dissipated. Chou glanced behind him at the honor guard being deployed - a full lance of *Battlemasters*. The weapons were locked, and ammo removed, but it was hoped that the sight of such a nominally powerful force would show that they were taking the Combine seriously. Of course, no one outside the GDI was aware of the artillery pointed at the landing site, in case things went wrong.

The field operators gave the all clear, and the diplomatic group loaded themselves into the two waiting Hummers to make the quick trip to the base of the lead dropship. As they approached, the loading ramp on the dropper opened up, allowing a lance of mismatched medium mechs to disembark, and take up their own guard positions.

It was fairly obvious to anyone who was watching which side was more professional. Smith winced internally at the slight they had been given by the Combine, but there would be time to smooth that over later. The two ground cars stopped, and the party got out to greet Tai-sa Kurita, who had walked down the ramp to meet the others. Ambassador Taro and the youngest Kurita took the lead, and quickly exchanged personal and official greetings. In an unusual break from official protocol, the old Kurita hugged his granddaughter closely before releasing her.

Chou and Smith wondered who the well dressed man behind Ulysses was. Both of them quickly pegged him as a professional, given the way he was taking in all the sights without being overwhelmed, or being condescending.

Separating from Alicia, Ulysses strode with a firm gait over to Chou, who salutes. The Tai-sa responded in kind, and then reached into an inside pocket. He produced a scroll that was tied off with a velvet ribbon and sealed in wax. Chou was confused as it was handed to him, and he examined it more closely. The only identifying mark on it was the impression of a Chinese dragon on the seal. Looking up at his counterpart, who nods, Chou gently broke the seal and unrolled the paper. He was aware of Taro and Smith looking over his shoulders, both curious as to its contents.

He read it, then read it again. "Kuso!" he swore. A glance at Taro, then a "Sorry, Ambassador."

"To our beloved Cousin, Chou Kurita;

I, Takashi Kurita, do invite you to a personal audience with the Dragon upon the world of Luthien before the year is out. It is understood that your current commitments prevent a prompt presence before his August person, and so you have been granted this period of grace. It is hoped that despite this, you will arrive soon."

Below was an ink stamp with the name of Takashi Kurita impressed into the paper.

Smith read it over, then looked up at the Colonel, who was still

trying to process this. "Well, my boy. It seems like you need to get an appropriate present."

HPG Station

Port Krin, Antallos

14 February 3022

The lineups at the ComStar station were longer than usual. Something to do with the holiday that day, Remus supposed. He paid the Acolyte for the small slip of paper with the message addressed to him, and politely turned down the offer of a junior acolyte to read it for him. While he had used such services in the past, his current assignment meant he didn't have to pretend to be illiterate.

He left the HPG station, and shielded his eyes from the harsh noon-day glare. It was one of his days off from Bob's shop, and so he tended to use these days to either catch up on his real job, or actually relax. Today was a definite relaxation day, he reminded himself. The entire shop had pulled extra shifts when the GDI needed people to help build the new factory on the edge of town, and Bob's was considered trustworthy enough for the job. But now that it was done, he turned down one of the roads, and headed towards a unique feature that had emerged over the past couple months.

Somehow, someone with plenty of money had purchased a full city block near the center of Port Krin, just off the core, and demolished all the buildings there. In its place a park was planted, using trees and grasses from Antallos and apparently from Motherlode as well. The greenery was an amazing contrast to the dust and dirty buildings that surrounded it, and the civilian population had taken an immediate liking to the area.

Remus suspected the GDI was behind this, as part of their Urban Renewal Project, but there was no evidence for or against that position. As he wandered in that general direction, intending to take part of the relaxing atmosphere, maybe even put his feet into one of the small ponds there, he walked past a recently erected shipping-container apartment.

It was yet another novel idea from the Motherloders as he paused,

and wished he had that camera he purchased with him. Shipping containers were ubiquitous across the Sphere, and even into Clan space, a universal standard for the transportation of cargo. Even Motherlode used the same dimensions, but that wasn't the point. Here, they were converting unused containers into temporary homes, stacked and arranged like apartments for one or two people. And even these steel crates provided a definite improvement over the standards of living a mere year previous.

It also offered an interesting view into the mind set of the Initiative. They wasted nothing, and tried to find extra uses for anything they could get their hands on. It wasn't that it was a unique attitude when compared to others across the Sphere, but the way they went about it was. To them, even if something was built for one purpose, they could make it so that it could be used for another. And the things they made? Well, Cargo containers became homes and mobile clinics, soldiers acted as police - helping lost children and old ladies cross the street. He had even seen one of their tanks pull a civilian vehicle that had broken down out of a ditch.

On that thought, he wondered just why they used the phrase '*Macgyvering*' when describing such multi-functionality. And yet, if their world was truly the Motherlode as promised by the previous Administrator of the Port, why were they so conscientious about reusing and recycling everything? Certainly salvage had a part in that, but the more he thought about that subject, the less it seemed like they were just salvaging. So few of the mechs and materials recovered across Antallos were being refurbished and returned to duty.

It made perfect sense that some mechs would be too far gone to be restored, but then, where was all the extra material going? The easiest answer was Motherlode. But why? It was apparent that world was far away, so why move military assets back there?

Too many questions, and not enough answers. Once again, he wondered if he had done the right thing in fending off the offer to join the GDI Foreign Legion. But as he told the recruiter in the sands those weeks ago after finding the *Orion*, he liked working for Bob (not a lie), and that running an Industrial Mech required different

skills than piloting a Battlemech (also not a lie). And yet, any other group in the Inner Sphere would have drafted or conscripted him into the army over those reasons, and he was afraid that the GDI would as well. But the recruitment officer simply nodded, and accepted his reasoning.

They did, however, leave an open invitation should he change his mind. This was a frame of thought that boggled the Clansman. Back home, the Caste system made sure everyone was in their proper place, with Mechwarriors at the top of Clan structure, while in the Inner Sphere, nobility ruled and people did as they were told. The GDI? They seemed more like a meritocracy. You were given the position you felt you were best at doing. They didn't force anything, but simply let their society organize itself into whatever was needed.

He shook his head, clearing his mind of the stray thoughts. He was supposed to be relaxing today, not thinking about work. And besides, there was only so much conjecture he could do by himself, so he unfolded the piece of paper with the message on it, and began to read as he crossed into the park. It was from his 'mother'.

"Dear Remus, thank you for your letter. Your description of a good life have convinced your sister Mary (and her husband) to pack up and try to move to Antallos as well!" There was more, but that was the substance of the letter. He was being told that there were two more agents coming sometime in the next three months, depending on jumpship travel times.

College of Engineering, New Avalon Institute of Science
New Avalon, Federated Suns
27 February 3022

The sounds of welding vanished as the door closed behind the two Battlemech Engineers. Quentin Watson and Robyn Leewood each sat down at the table in the room, and began to examine the information before them.

"The shoulder connections are well designed," Quentin began as he tapped the paper in front of him, "but they didn't send anything about how they got the electronics to hook up."

"Well, that's all we really asked for, Quentin." Robyn countered as she examined her own copy of the same paper. "And besides, it's not like the Motherloders would actually tell us how to build this *Mad Cat* of theirs. Let them have their pride." She smiled. "Even though it was pretty obvious what parts they used."

"*Marauder* and *Catapult*. Intriguing concept, I must admit. Although lacking in imagination on the name. How goes your students on that front?"

Robyn leaned back in her chair. "We have two competing designs. Both follow the same design schema as the *Mad Cat*. The first has 2 PPCs and 2 LRM 10's on a 70 ton frame. 10 tonnes of armor, but definite heat problems. And only moves 65 klicks. The other design is lighter. 60 tons; 8 of armor, an AC-10 in one arm, and 3 Medium lasers on the right side. Good heat management, and a 300 series engine for 85 klicks."

"Interesting. Prototypes?"

"My boys are building them now, and both should be ready by the end of the year. The 70 tonner is being called the *Sun Cat*, and the smaller one the *Moon Cat* for now. We've already reserved the name *Rakshasa* for the final design."

"Well then, I do look forward to the results. It would be quite embarrassing to be out-designed by some Periphery world, lostech or no." Robyn only nodded, planning on showing the entire Inner Sphere just how to do a '*Mad Cat*' properly.

**ComStar Jumpship Holy Terra
Draconis Combine
28 February 3022**

Considering they were transporting HPG equipment, ComStar had allowed the use of one of their small number of (official) Jumpships to go to Antallos. The use of the old ship, a Star League relic, also meant that the personel and passengers aboard had guaranteed privacy.

Precentor Julius Style (ROM) looked at the clock in his office. It was time for his meeting with Adept Fox, who had asked for this to report something that he had discovered about the mysterious Motherlodgers. While Julius had some doubts about the young analyst, they were not about his ability to understand the information put in front of him. That the Precentor ROM himself had selected Fox to be sent to Antallos was a testament to his skill.

A knock on the door, and Julius called out that it was unlocked. Adept Fox opened the door, and greeted his superior. The ROM agent returned the greeting, and motioned for the analyst to take a seat. Mulligan had gotten over his nervousness at being in this office weeks ago when he first presented what knowledge he had about Motherlode to Style.

"Thank you for letting me have this time, Precentor." Mulligan said as he placed a folder onto the table in front of him.

"I am glad for it, Adept Fox. You have been a boon to the cause of Blake, and I would be at fault to not listen to you." Not a total lie, the Precentor reminded himself. But it was part of his orders to slowly initiate the Adept into the Word. And to that end, his skills were truly a Blessing from Blake. "Now, what is it you wished to tell me?"

"Well, Precentor, I was going over old reports, seeking more information about the Motherlodgers. Now, while their retributive attack on Antallos is quite obviously their first public foray, I believe that they have had an active presence in the Inner Sphere for almost 20 years already.

"Now, it makes no sense for a Periphery state to just lose all semblance of space flight. They would have had jumpships just to get to their colony world." Julius nodded, accepting the explanation so far. "In addition, it stands to reason that because our Explorer Corps haven't detected Motherlode yet, they are fairly far out." He flipped open the folder, and produced a map of the eastern edge of the Inner Sphere. Handing it to Julius, he pointed at various lines and marks on it. "Here is Antallos, where we know they are. You can see the extent of the Outworlds Alliance, the FedSuns and the Combine here, here

and here."

"Why is this world circled?" Julius squinted. "Delos IV, here in the Federated Suns. And this large line leading away from the Sphere?"

"Ah, I was getting to those. Now, you can see this grey line here. This is the area of space that the Explorer Corps have gone to. You can see that it includes pretty much everything within 200 light-years of the Inner Sphere. Although we haven't actually visited all these worlds, the Corps has listened for Radio signals, and found nothing in that region to indicate Motherlode.

"That line you pointed out was the known exit vector of Kerensky's Fleet. It lay between Antallos and Delos IV, moving away from the Sphere. Although, you already know this, I felt it prudent to include that on this map to help support my case.

"On April 11, 3005, here at Delos IV, was the first appearance of the mercenary group called the Wolf's Dragoons. Please note the proximity to the exit line of Kerensky, as well as Antallos on the other side of that line."

"I think I see where you are going with this, but please continue." Julius saw the pieces fall into place, and waited for Fox to confirm his own thoughts.

"Yes, yes. Well, here's the thing. I believe that the Dragoons are in fact Motherloders, and that Motherlode itself is the final stop for the missing Star League forces. Look at the new Mech designs that the Dragoons have, as well as the professional attitudes coming from the GDI and the Dragoons. Very similar. Not to mention where would they get their supplies.

"But the Motherloders used only captured ships and mechs in their attack on Antallos."

"It has to be a case of misinformation! They did not want to reveal their hand, so they used their own non-mech forces, supplementing the salvaged pirates!" Mulligan was enthusiastic about his deductions. "This makes a lot of sense. The Motherloders rebuilt, and sent the

Dragoons to scout out the Inner Sphere - look at the regular 5 year contracts they have, and their circling through the Great Houses. They will be done with their contract with Steiner in '25, then move onto the Combine to be done in '30, then disappear back to Motherlode. Although I suppose that was their plan before Antallos stumbled upon them, and forced their hand."

Julius took the folder in hand, and examined the contents in more detail. In contrast to the excited declarations by Fox, the written analysis was far more detailed, with plenty of supporting evidence. And the evidence was there. There was even a note showing how the Bronze Eagle used by the GDI was similar to a certain battalion taken by Kerensky when he fled the Sphere.

"But why don't they fly the flag of Cameron? Surely if they are Star League, they would use it? Or why not come to ComStar?"

Mulligan shook his head. "Precentor, the Successor States cannot, and will never, agree to any Star League without them at the head of it. Now can you imagine what would happen if some Deep Periphery state appeared, flying that flag? Far too much attention, and it would probably end poorly for the Motherlodgers.

"As for asking for the assistance of our Blessed Order, I would put forth that if an unknown Jumpship appeared at Terra, and proclaimed themselves the lost Star League, how would any rational member of the Order respond? With disbelief, I assure you. No, it is better for them to hide their true identity until they are ready to reveal it.

"This is quite troubling, Adept. If you are right, that means that the Star League still exists in some fashion in the Deep Periphery to the East of the Sphere, out past the Grantville cluster. And I can understand why they would sneak the Wolf's in first, to see what the state of the Inner Sphere is for themselves."

Mulligan sat down, pleased that he had convinced the Precentor.

"I will forward this to the Primus right away. We must make plans for this contingency. Good work, Adept, and thank you."

"All for Blake, Precentor Style."

Offices of the Precentor Dieron
Terra, Sol System
02 March 3022

Normally, reporting to the Precentor in the safety of her own office was a very touch-and-go proposition. There was always the chance that even good news could be turned against the bearer, an unfortunate occurrence that had occurred in the past.

So, the ROM analyst took a deep breath to steady his nerves when Precentor Waterly walked into his office instead.

"Precentor! An honor! I wasn't expecting yo..."

"You have something for me?"

The analyst's mind stumbled, trying to recall just what, exactly, that the Precentor had wanted. And then in a flash it came back to him. "Ah, yes! A moment please!" He was grateful that he had something to give to her before she lost any patience with him, necessitating his replacement. "Please, have a seat while I get the file prepared." He offered her his chair as he quickly went into the back room to get it.

He emerged a couple minutes later to find that the Precentor Dieron had cleared off his desk, and was filling out some of the paperwork that would normally have gotten to her desk later. He reminded himself that she wasn't the sort to waste time, a trait that served her well on the First Circuit.

Sitting in the seat normally used for his own guests, he handed the thin file to the Precentor. "In accordance with your instructions, we have been looking for any unusual events coming from the regions around Antallos, looking for anything that could be traced back to the nascent CSN."

Waterly glared, a frown on her face. She recognized when someone was buying time, and was giving warning that she would not tolerate

that from her subordinate.

"Well, there was a request from an ISF agent in the Outworlds Alliance a few months ago for more information about a certain Jumpship. It got lost in the fact that this was a minor agent making an inane request with no collaborating evidence."

Waterly's glare turned back a notch. She recognized that base line information was also important, but was eager to get to the important parts.

"Well, we normally would think nothing of this ourselves, except that the ISF eventually returned that the ship was not unusual. A Merchant jumper and a Seeker dropper. But when you asked for us to look again, we noticed that this ship corresponds to a jumper and dropper deployed by Port Krin, but not yet seen afterwards.

"To make things more interesting, once the Avante Garde left the OWA, we lost track of it, but a search of the records indicated that another Merchant / Seeker combination appeared a couple systems away under different names."

That bit got Waterly's attention. "Prove it."

"That ship was distributing farming equipment under both aliases, using a design that, while quite simple and robust, as one of our agents reported to the Precentor ROM New Avalon, but not found in the Inner Sphere for several hundred years." He paused from his slightly rushed delivery, not sure how to best frame this next bit of information. "The office on New Avalon" - best to deflect blame to them, not to him - "believes that the last factory making that design was on Terra, and was destroyed in the Coup."

"New Avalon thinks this?"

"I am merely repeating what they sent to me." Silently, he added prayers to Blake that he could get out of this in one piece. If only he had time to properly put the information together before presenting it, he could do much better...

"And what of this ship now?" The Precentor seemed to be thinking, rather than reacting. A good sign.

"I sent word to New Avalon to trace this jumpship, and I was awaiting a reply before coming to see you with this information."

Waterly stood up, and circled the desk, heading for the exit. "Tell me more when New Avalon gives you the information." The door slammed behind her, and the ROM analyst took a few deep breaths before heading to the washroom.

While he was gone, a fresh report was delivered, one from a certain Jumpship on the way to the Periphery.

GDI Base, Port Krin
Antallos, Periphery
January 25, 2007/3022

Captain Greg Moore bolted straight up in his bed as he woke with a start. Panting heavily the professional soldier felt the cold sweat on his body and in the dampness of his sheets. He had been having that dream more and more lately. His dream, no, calling it a dream wasn't being completely fair, nor would it be so calling it a nightmare. It was a memory, plain and simple.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he barely noticed the slight chill of the floor against the bare skin of his feet. The privilege of rank allowed him his own private room, though it wasn't really much considering the building the GDI was using as part of its barracks was an old hotel that had clearly seen better days. Greg didn't particularly care; the only thing he wanted was privacy. Besides, he had been in worse shit-holes since he had earned his Marine Officer's commission when he came out of the Naval ROTC program at Duke University.

Standing up, the clink of his dog tags tapping together as they landed against the bare flesh of his muscled chest and his breathing the only sounds in the room, the young U.S. Marine turned GDI soldier walked the few feet to the bathroom attached to his bedroom. Hitting the lights and leaning over a large bowl that he filled with water from a metal pitcher, the plumbing in the old hotel wasn't the best, the 26 year-old splashed his face to remove the sticky sweat that clung to his skin. Looking into mirror the man found his own blue eyes staring back at him as water dripped off his nose and ran down his chin.

However, that wasn't the only thing there. No, the lingering memories and thoughts that had woken him remained.

Port Krin, Antallos
Antallos System, Periphery
August 8, 2006/3021

"All right Blue Group let's get going. We've got reports from the front that a new wave is forming to try and knock us off planet," Brevet-Captain Gregory Moore noted as he moved his OSR-2C Ostroc, designated as Blue 1, up to a walking pace of 41.6kph, being careful as he walked the heavy machine down one of the poorly paved streets of Port Krin.

"Right with you Lead," Blue 2, 1st Lieutenant Mark Eckel reported as he brought the RFL-3N Rifleman he piloted with his backseater 2nd Lieutenant Carol Wienberg to pace Moore's Mech on its right flank.

"Copy that Boss," 1st Lieutenant Roger Bligh, piloting a TDR-5SE Thunderbolt designated as Blue 4, reported as his backseater, 1st Lieutenant Willy Matzer checked over the power feed to the Mech's large laser.

Hearing the confirmation from the two other Mechs currently left in his unit Moore leaned back slightly in his pilot's chair to shout, "How we doing Frank?"

1st Lieutenant Franklin Oh was the Ostroc's backseater and the closet thing Greg Moore had to a best friend at the moment. The two men had both been in the United States Marine Corp before volunteering/being tapped to join the GDI Expeditionary Force, having met during ROTC and bonding slightly when they learned that they shared a love of science fiction, especially the Battletech and Mechwarrior series. Neither one would've guessed back when they were 18 and just freshmen at Duke University that they would one day actually sit in a real BattleMech and use it in an actual operation on an 'alien' planet.

"I'm fine, just concerned about the fact that we're out of ammo for the missile launcher," the Korean-American responded as he noted that the wire outline of the heavy Mech was entirely yellow with a few specs of red here and there. "I wish we had been able to get more than just some armor replaced before heading back out."

"Not much we can do about that seeing as how the entire expedition is running low on expendables," Greg commented as he side stepped the barely patched up Ostroc around a tarp covered cart that had

rolled out of nearby alleyway. "Personally I would've liked to have seen the techs get Alex and Tony back up and running."

"Yeah, that would've been nice considering the odds we're facing," the 26 year-old soldier noted from the backseat.

Red 3, a TBT-5N Trebuchet piloted by 1st Lieutenant Alex Mendez and backseated by 2nd Lieutenant Tony Catelli had gone down that morning after a nasty tangle with a VND-1R Vindicator. The Vindicator had nearly severed the slightly heavier Mech's right leg with its PPC. Only the timely intervention of Blue 2 and Blue 1 had saved the Trebuchet and its pilots from being destroyed seeing as how the rest of its armor had been just as thoroughly ravaged. Even so the right hip actuator had seized up when the slag from the PPC hits had gotten into it. It had taken everything Alex Mendez had as a pilot to get the wounded Mech back to a rear area to see if the techs could use what spare parts and armor were left to try and get the Mech back into the fighting. Unfortunately it just wasn't meant to be.

"At least they're both still alive," the 26 year-old Marine pilot thought as he noted that he and the two other remaining Mechs of Blue Group were coming up on the halfway point to the front.

Originally Blue Group had just been Moore and the other three Mechs designated as Blue 2, 3, and 4. However, the old adage of no plan surviving contact with the enemy had proven quite true when the GDI had found their single day of battle stretching out now to day three of what almost appeared to be a never ending series of fights. With new enemies crashing against the defenses every other hour of each day GDI units had been hastily regrouped as Mechs and Tanks were lost and no fresh replacements were available. In the course of that Blue Group had gotten the two survivors of Red Group folded in with them. With Red 2 and 3 added in the six Mech unit had been designated a 'flying' platoon by Colonel Chou Kurita who had then designated the 26 year-old Moore as Brevet-Captain of the 6 machine unit, basically giving the Marine turned GDI trooper an impromptu battlefield promotion. The men and women of the small detachment had moved around constantly to plug gaps in the line and prevent any breakthroughs into Port Krin by the enemy. Such actions had not been without costs however. Blue 3 and Red 2 had been lost with

only the backseater from Red 2 surviving the wounds that took the life of his partner and pilot. The two troopers of Red 3 might have their Mech currently out of commission, but at least they were both still alive.

"Hey Greg," Frank Oh suddenly piped up. "Something's up. Com-net has just lit up with a ton of traffic. It looks like.... Wait, I'm patching you in."

"Priority Alert! Priority Alert! This is Captain Benjamin Hertzell of Lion Group," the voice of the Israeli tank commander broke through into Moore's helmet receiver. "I have bogey's coming up out of the river to the Southeast! Strike that, I have bandits! I say again multiple bandits...Zzzzzt!"

"Lion 1! This is Titan 2, say again!" the voice of Colonel Kurita breaking the static that had cluttered the com channel. "Sitrep! Somebody talk to me! Does anyone have eyes on Lion Group?!"

"Titan 2 this is Fox 1," the voice of FeldWebel Hans Rücker answered. "Fox squad is nearby and has visual on Lion. I see five, count zero-five Mechs coming out of the river to the Southeast, they're a mixed group. They are engaging the tanks of Lion Group. Mein Gott, Lion is getting slaughtered!"

Though he couldn't see it himself Brevet-Captain Moore could tell by the tension in Rücker's voice that things were bad. It didn't help matters that many of the GDI tank groups had been moved to the flanks and rear because of the shortage of ammo. Lion Group probably had only a few rounds between them at best and if those Mechs had come up out of the river then they had gotten right on top of the tankers before the Merkavas could use their range advantage.

"Blue 2, Blue 4, prepare for course correction," Greg ordered as he pulled the Ostroc up and began to turn it towards the Southeast. "Frank, patch me through to Colonel Kurita and Fox 1."

"You're green Boss," Oh's response came back having anticipated his friend and commander's order.

"Titan 2 this is Blue 1, requesting vector and best speed course to intercept bandits," the 26 year-old declared as he began to walk his Mech towards the anticipated confrontation.

"Blue 1, Titan 2 here. You only have three Mechs, patchwork armor, and no ammo between you," Colonel Chou Kurita stated bluntly. "I can not guarantee you assistance or relief. All other GDI elements are preparing for main assault at the front. There is no artillery to send your way and Leopards are currently out of commission or prioritized elsewhere."

"Blue 1 acknowledges Titan 2," Greg said without hesitation, though he knew he was probably condemning him and his fellows to a suicide stand. "Blue Elements will hold the line and buy time for other forces to regroup, prepare defense, and ready for counterattack or withdrawal."

The line was silent for a moment before Colonel Kurita's voice came back online, "Titan 2 acknowledges Blue 1. Best speed course is being sent now. Good luck."

Rather than comment on the somber tone of Chou Kurita's voice or make some witty remark Greg Moore focused his attention on what was important, moving his Mech and the two other machines of his group to intercept the enemy before these new bandits could get too far into the city and closer to the GDI rear area. Throttling up to 65kph, he set the Ostroc into a light run, the Thunderbolt and Rifleman both following along behind him at their top speeds. It was dangerous for those Mechs to travel so fast, especially in the tight confines of the city, but right now hitting the enemy before they could advance any further was the priority.

"Fox 1 this is Blue 1. Blue 1, 2, and 4 are moving to intercept bandits! Sitrep!" the young Marine turned GDI Mech pilot called out over the com.

"Fox 1 here Blue Lead. Lion Elements have been destroyed, but they took out a Panther in the process," the FeldWebel responded over the encrypted channel. "Bandit numbers are now four Mechs, say again zero-four Mechs. Designation of remaining bandits is as follows: one

Griffin, one Shadow Hawk, one Wolverine, and one Commando."

"Blue Group copies that Fox 1," Moore answered as he moved his small group ever closer to the intended intercept point.

"Well at least Lion got one of the bastards before they went down," Franklin Oh commented from his backseat position.

Ignoring the remark from his friend Greg concentrated on moving the Ostroc towards the coming engagement. The 26 year-old's blue eyes were carefully looking between that, the Mech's sensors, and the weapons diagnostic. He had the two large lasers and the two medium lasers working properly, though they were out of ammo for the 60ton Mech's missile launcher. The sensors had already picked up the five enemy Mechs moving into the outskirts of Port Krin and Frank had patched in to the feed from one of the satellites over head that the Expeditionary Force had deployed on their initial burn in at Antallos. The biggest problem right now was that while he could see the enemy neither he nor Blue 2 or 4 could actually hit them what with their longer ranged weapons out of ammo and several larger buildings in the way of their large lasers. Thankfully the enemy couldn't see them yet due to their craptastic BT sensor packages and the fact that the buildings of the city were blocking line of sight for the most part.

"Alright people I want this done smart," Moore ordered as he and the other two units of Blue Group got ever closer to the enemy. "We don't have to beat them totally, just slow them down and buy every one back at the rear time. Let's give them a few salvos and then see if we can't string them out. If we can take a few of them down then we'll do so, but don't take unnecessary risks."

"Just to clarify for the record, this is a *necessary* risk, right?" Lieutenant Mark Eckel said over the com with a chuckle in his voice.

"Heh," Franklin Oh responded with a chortle. "Look on the bright side, things can't get much wor-...."

"Don't you dare finish that statement! "Lieutenant Willy Matzer, the backseater of Blue 4, declared over the com. "Whenever someone says

that they're always proven wrong. Right now we all don't need any more trouble."

"Cut the chatter and prepare to engage," Brevet-Captain Moore ordered as he noted that he and his unit were entering the maximum range of their large lasers.

"I've got a hard sensor lock on the enemy, we're entering maximum range on the large lasers," Carol Wienberg stated as Mark Eckel moved the Rifleman forward. "Crap sensors or not those guys have got to know that we are almost on them."

"Copy that Blue 2, remember to keep something covering your back. That Rifleman has shit for rear armor," Greg ordered as he began to feel the rush of adrenaline hit him as his body anticipated the coming combat. "Blue 4, get ready to pull a 'Jack-in-the-Box' on my mark.... Mark!"

With that declaration both the TDR-5SE Thunderbolt triggered its jumpjets and rocketed up and over the buildings blocking its line of sight with the enemy as the OSC-2R Ostroc throttled up to 86.6kph and swung around the sides of buildings to support its jumping companion. Riding upon the powerful plumes of fusion fire and smoke the Thunderbolt arced over the buildings almost elegantly. As the Mech reached the peak of its arc the beams from its large laser lashed out as the two large laser beams from the Ostroc also fired. By pure coincidence the three beams all struck the same targeted enemy, the Commando that had been out in the lead and had entered a small square with an old broken-down fountain in its center.

Throwing his throttle down to slow the Ostroc into a skid that began to take it behind a nearby building, Brevet-Captain Greg Moore watched as the lighter Commando reeled back as the armor on its front melted like butter beneath a red hot knife. Just as his Mech skidded behind the building, cutting the line of sight, the blond haired 26 year-old noticed a rather nice explosion engulf the upper chest of the 25ton Mech. The concentrated firepower of the three large lasers must have been enough to touch off the ammo for the SRM6 launcher housed in the light Mech's chest, the Marine turned GDI trooper decided.

"Good shooting Blue 2," the leader of the small GDI Mech detachment declared as he readied his Mech to pop back around the corner of the building and fire at the Commando one last time to make certain it got put down. "Remember, we need to slow these guys down. Do what you need to."

"I copy lead," Bligh responded, moving the Thunderbolt out of his own cover to use two of his three medium lasers to fire upon the Shadow Hawk that was moving up to support the lighter Commando. "Hey Mark, you can jump in here any time you know!"

"Heh, some of us don't have fancy booster rockets strapped to our rides," the Rifleman pilot joked as he stepped the slower Mech around the corner of a building and fired his large lasers into the same Shadow hawk that the Thunderbolt had targeted, striking the right arm of the medium Mech with both of them. "Besides, I prefer good old fashion walking anyways. All that jumping around will rattle away what little brain you have left."

Rolling his eyes slightly at the banter of his troopers Greg did not bother to tell either to pipe down. The three GDI Mechs were in a bad situation and were facing death. If a person needed witty banter to try and deal with the fear that attempted to overwhelm them then he would allow it. After all, the comments were currently only being broadcast onto the private com line used by Blue group. Even if someone in the GDI was listening in it hardly mattered to him. All that Greg cared about right now was making sure that the enemy did not get any closer to the vulnerable rear area of the GDI. He'd deal with everything else if he and his men survived.

"Commando is down," the leader of Blue group called out as he finished off the crippled Commando with his medium lasers, letting his large lasers cycle through and avoiding taxing the Ostroc's heatsinks too much too soon.

"The Griffin is trying to flank us on our right," Frank called out from his seat behind Moore. "Blue 2 and 4 have the Shadow Hawk caught in a nasty crossfire."

"Roger," the Brevet-captain answered as he turned the Ostroc only to see the Griffin slip behind a building and out of his crosshairs before he could fire. "Where's that Wolverine?"

"Tracking it now and....," the Lieutenant began only to trail off and then suddenly yell, "Bravo 4, to your left!"

Using its jumpjets to clear a few buildings, much like how the Thunderbolt of Blue group had done earlier, the enemy Wolverine came down on jets of fire to the left of the slightly larger Rifleman. Carol Wienberg must have already noticed the enemy machine before Frank had called the warning as the Rifleman was already beginning to turn to try and protect its left flank. However, 60tons of machine doesn't exactly turn on a dime so as the heavy Mech turned the Wolverine opened up with a full Alpha Strike.

Six SRMs corkscrewed out from the launcher perched on the medium Mech's left shoulder. Two of the unguided missiles missed but the other four struck the Rifleman. Two of the SRMs struck the left arm just behind where the double barrels of a large laser and AC/5 connected with the rest of the arm while the other two found the patched armor just underneath the arm, where the heavy limb connected back to the Mech's torso. The explosion of the missiles warheads and the subsequent loss of armor caused the heavy Mech to stumble like a punch drunk fighter in a desperate attempt to adjust for the change in weight coupled with the momentum caused by the turn it had begun executing as the Wolverine had been firing. The shifting and faltering of the heavy Mech was, luckily, enough to dodge the Wolverine's medium laser, the deadly beam of light striking the upper floor of the building towards the Rifleman's right flank and setting it ablaze as concrete melted and/or ignited beneath its hellish touch. The worst damage, however, occurred when the Wolverine's autocannon barked. The shells from the AC/5 stitched their way up the left hip and left side of the heavier Mech, the stumble of the Rifleman causing the stream of shells to strike it in its proverbial armpit. With armor previously damaged from earlier fights and from the SRMs that had hit only milliseconds before the stream of fire from the Wolverine's AC/5 worked like a buzzsaw, cutting the already weak left arm off from the torso of the larger Mech.

"Bastard!" Roger Bligh yelled loudly over the com channel, having seen the destruction wrought on his teammate's Mech; turning his Thunderbolt enough to lash out with the three medium lasers in the 65ton Mech's left torso.

"Bligh! Matzer!" Frank tried to call out a warning as the move by the Thunderbolt had left it open to attack from the Shadow Hawk.

The 55ton medium Mech triggered its shoulder mounted AC/5 emptying round after round into the larger Thunderbolt. The shells traced a line up the right side of the Mech and over its right arm and the large laser attached there. To add to the injury the pilot of the Shadow Hawk fired his SRM2 launcher, however, both missiles missed, corkscrewing out behind the Thunderbolt to hit the same building that the Wolverine's medium laser had struck.

Turning his Ostroc enough to bring its torso mounted lasers to bear Greg Moore cut loose with his large lasers striking the exposed left flank of the Shadow Hawk, gasping at the wave of heat that rose through the cockpit. At the same time the man shouted, "Frank! Where's that damn Griffin?! I don't want him getting the jump on us!"

The Shadow Hawk shuddered as its flank was blasted with the massive joules of power from the Ostroc's two large lasers. The medium Mech shifting around like someone who had just gotten cold-cocked as it swayed slightly back and forth. Sensing an opportunity Brevet-Captain Moore prepared to trigger his medium lasers in the hopes of perhaps knocking the Shadow Hawk down. However, a shout from his backseater stopped him from mashing his thumb down on the firing stud.

"Griffin is at our five o'clock!" Franklin Oh announced loudly over the sound of the fighting and hum of the fusion engine nestled below them. "He's...he's on top of the building. He's got a missile lock on us!"

The warning came just at the right time, Moore responding almost immediately, ducking his Mech below the PPC bolt that would have caught the Ostroc in the back of the head had it been standing straight up. Squatting down the heavy Mech was wreathed with fire

as LRMs struck its armor, the missiles having tracked just enough to follow the quick movement. Cranking the control sticks hard the young Brevet-Captain turned his Mech just enough to line up his crosshairs on the offending Griffin. However, before the man could fire his medium lasers the 55ton Mech leapt backwards using its jumpjets to once again slip behind the cover of a building.

Back behind the Ostroc designated as Blue 1 the Wolverine was continuing to punish the Rifleman designated as Blue 2. The medium Mech was relentlessly firing its autocannon into the heavier Mech. In response the Rifleman was desperately trying to return fire with its torso mounted medium lasers and remaining large laser, but the numerous impacts of autocannon rounds threw off its aim as only one of the medium lasers hit. A few buildings down from the two Mechs the Thunderbolt designated as Blue 4 focused back onto the Shadow Hawk.

"Damn it!" Willy Matzer, the backseater for the Thunderbolt, yelled across the unit's com line, the right arm mounted laser releasing an electrical arc as the beam it fired died out prematurely. "We've lost the large laser!"

Turning to try and provide support Moore tried to mindfully of the his rear camera in case the Griffin that Frank was tracking should suddenly pop back out of hiding. However, the 26 year-old officer pulled his Mech up short as a frantic voice cut across the com channel.

"Ah! Shit, we've taken gyro damage!" 2nd Lieutenant Carol Wienberg screamed as the Rifleman she was in started to list to the side. "The reactor is...Zzzt! Damn it the reactor's scrambling! Zzzt! We're punching out!"

Fire blossomed around the head of the 60ton Mech as two command chairs and their attached riders rocketed free of the dying Mech. Collapsing in a heap as its gyro gave out and its reactor shut down to prevent a meltdown or explosion, the Rifleman lay there battered and broken. Wanting to keep an eye on where the ejecting Eckel and Wienberg were heading Greg stopped himself as he knew he had to focus on the remaining enemy Mechs. He and Blue 4 were the only

ones left and were now outnumbered again.

"I've got track on Mark and Carol," Franklin stated quickly as the Ostroc shifted and moved forward towards the nearby Shadow Hawk. "I'm relaying their signal to nearby forces. Hopefully Fox or someone can get to them."

Silently nodding in acknowledgement Moore triggered his medium lasers, one striking the already damaged flank of the Shadow Hawk while the other stuck the 55ton Mech's left arm at the elbow joint. Blinking the sweat from his eyes as a new wave of heat passed through the cockpit both Moore and Oh were thankful for the GDI issued plugsuits that they wore. The things were rather tight and did little to hid one's modesty, but the specially woven cooling network in them made the sauna of a cockpit at least somewhat tolerable.

"We can't keep this up much longer," the 26 year-old GDI trooper thought as he watched Blue 4's Thunderbolt strike the Shadowhawk square in the chest with its three medium lasers as it took the missiles from the Hawk's LRM and SRM launchers on its own chest and a burst of autocannon fire to its back from the Wolverine. "These guys are competent and unlike us came into this with fresh ammo and armor. We've got to drag this out longer, but the way things are go-...."

"Griffin is coming up behind us!" Franklin shouted in warning, giving his friend and pilot time to turn and meet the medium Mech.

Striding right around the corner of the building that had blocked two Mechs from each other's line of sight the Griffin snapped a shot of with its PPC. As the bolt hit, the man made lighting digging deep into the empty missile launcher in the right torso, Greg fired his Mech's large lasers in response. Only one of the beams hit, cutting a nasty scar across the chest armor of the other Mech while the other arced over its head having been thrown off by the PPC hit. Gritting his teeth, the dulcet tone of a female voice warning him of his heat levels, Brevet-Captain Moore fought to keep the 60ton machine on its feet. The young pilot was thankful at that moment for his backseater as Franklin Oh hit the override button on his own command console to prevent the Mech from shutting down automatically as its heatsinks were pushed to their limits by the repeated firing of the

lasers and the heat of the Antallos day.

"We need some help here!" Willy Matzer's voice broke across the com channel

Shooting a quick glance to his rear camera Greg felt a knot form in his stomach as Roger and Willy in their Thunderbolt got caught in a crossfire of autocannon slugs from both the Wolverine and the Shadow Hawk. They wouldn't last much longer like this and neither would he and Frank if they kept trading shots with the Griffin. The Mechs he and his group had come into this fight with were poorly patched and long out of ammo. They had already lost Blue 2 and neither his Ostroc or Bligh and Matzer's Thunderbolt were going to last much longer at this rate. The mission was to buy time and so far they were accomplishing just that, but it was costing them. Greg Moore was a realist. There was no cavalry coming to save them, they were the cavalry. In order to buy the time the rest of the GDI needed, he and his men had to do what was necessary. But he was damned if he wouldn't take some of these pirate and merc bastards down first.

"Blue 4, break off and try and put some distance between you and the enemy!" the Brevet-Captain ordered as he fired his medium lasers at the Griffin, only a single one of them striking a glancing blow to the slightly smaller Mech's left side. "We need to string these bastards out or else they'll cut us to pieces and move on!"

"Copy that!" 1st Lieutenant Roger Bligh replied, the microphone not hiding the hints of doubt and fear in his voice. "But it's going to be pretty hard, they...Gaaaahhhhh! They got me and Willy pinned Damn good!"

"We'll make the distraction!" Greg roared over the com as the Ostroc took fire in the form of LRMs fired by the Griffin. "You guys move when it happens!"

Whatever the other Mechpilot said in return went unnoticed as Moore readied himself. It was an insane idea and one he had been told in his quick BattleMech training course never to try. However, right now there seemed to be little choice in the matter as he turned the Ostroc away from the Griffin and towards the enemy Shadow

Hawk.

"Hold on tight Frank!" the young pilot yelled as he opened the Ostroc's throttle up fully.

"What're you-...?!" the Korean-American began before swearing loudly as the Ostroc charged forward, "OH SHIT!"

Though the distance was too short to get up to the heavy Mech's top speed of 86.6kph the sudden burst of speed was enough to quickly close the gap between it and the Shadow Hawk. Coming in on the medium Mech's left flank the young Mechpilot yanked hard on his right control stick Greg forced the 60ton machine to raise its right hand and grab the long autocannon barrel perched on the hawk's left shoulder. Pulling hard on his sticks Moore found his Mech mirroring his action just as he hoped as it heaved sharply, crumpling the barrel of the weapon, and turned the Shadow Hawk violently towards his own Ostroc.

Rocking to the side hard and pivoting awkwardly from the force being exerted upon it as the mounting of its long barreled autocannon squealed in protest as it was pulled on; the Shadow Hawk was left completely open and unprepared for what was coming. Ignoring the thoughts of how horrified the pilot of the medium Mech must be, Moore gritted his teeth as he drove the left fist of his Ostroc straight into the Hawk's head, smashing the cockpit's glass and crushing the pilot inside. To an outside observer it would've just looked like the Ostroc had sucker-punched the slightly smaller Shadow Hawk. However, an observer from Earth might have also drawn a parallel observation relating to a children's game involving a red and blue robot as the head of the medium Mech broke apart and popped off due to the heavy blow. Not really thinking of either, Greg Moore was more interested in keeping his Mech upright now as the body of the Shadow Hawk began to fall to the ground, its left arm striking the Ostroc a glancing blow across the torso as the medium Mech twisted in a death spiral.

"Brace yourself!" the young Brevet Captain cried out as the Ostroc swayed, its Gyro locking up from the sudden shifts in weight and the light strike it had taken.

"SHIT!" 1st Lieutenant Oh yelled as his knuckles turned white as he tightly grasped the crash handles in front of him.

Cutting his throttle and slamming his feet onto the peddles in the cockpit of the Ostroc in order to try and keep the 60ton mass of metal upright Moore felt the heavy Mech shift and skid, its feet digging up the broken asphalt underneath them. Twisting the control sticks in his hands the pilot of the 60ton Mech pushed his Mechs arms out, shifting the dead weight of the Shadow Hawk away as armor plates buckled on the heavier Mechs arms. Warning tones blared as the armor icon showed the arms of the Ostroc flash between yellow and red. With a tumultuous 'Crash' the medium Mech slammed into the ground at the feet of the slightly heavier Mech causing the Ostroc to shift and sway some more.

"Frank?! You okay back there?!" the young Marine turned GDI trooper yelled to his partner as he steadied the 60ton machine.

Giving a groan Franklin Oh responded in a half-growl, "Yeah, just don't do that again...Ever. I don't think this bucket can take it."

"You know what they say Frank," Moore stated. "Those Who Dare, Win."

"That's the fucking Brits and their crazy SAS," the Korean-American replied with a slight hint of annoyance in his voice.

"Yeah and we're United States Marines," Greg returned with a wry grin as he noticed his targeting system flicker slightly as he brought the Ostroc around towards Blue 4's position. "We Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome. We're Devil Dogs and We Never Say Die."

"OoohRah." the 1st Lieutenant added firmly though he was still a might bit pissed off at his friend and pilot.

"Blue 4 just like I said," the blond 26 year-old commanded, "Get going and let's draw these guys-...!"

"Aaaah!"

The cry over the com drew stopped the Brevet-Captain's orders. He had been focusing on the damage his Mech had sustained and trying to make sure the Griffin didn't back shoot him. The sudden cry of Roger Bligh, however, drew his attention away from that and onto the Thunderbolt. Eyes widening the 26 year-old watched as the Thunderbolt collapsed onto the ground, its armor rent and torn in numerous areas as fire and plasma from its fusion engine along with greenish coolant leaked out in some places like blood. Standing over the stricken 65ton Mech the Wolverine did not bother to continue punishing Blue 4 with its autocannon as it had been.

"Blue 4!" Greg yelled into this throat mike, panic hitting him as Frank also tried to contact their stricken teammate. "Get out of there! I'll provide covering fire just get-...!"

Brevet-Captain Gregory Moore was unable to finish, his mouth going completely dry as he watched in horror as the Wolverine drew back its right leg and with deliberate precision kicked in the head of the downed Thunderbolt. Behind the blue-eyed Marine turned GDI officer 1st lieutenant Franklin Oh sat stunned. When they had punched in the head of the Shadow Hawk the Mech had still been a credible threat. Blue 4, the Thunderbolt piloted by 1st Lieutenant Roger Bligh and backseated by 1st Lieutenant William Matzer had been down, not a real threat anymore what with the way its armor had been mauled and its weaponry almost completely disabled. What the Wolverine pilot had just, deliberately done.... That was....

"Bastard!" Moore screamed, not caring if he was broadcasting or not as he fired everything his Ostroc had.

The beams of the large lasers reached out to strike the Wolverine high on its chest, obliterating the ball turret that housed the medium laser. Only one of the 60ton Mech's medium lasers fired, slicing into the lower abdomen of the medium Mech. His right eye flicking to the weapons' readout displayed on his HUD Greg saw that his second medium laser was a glaring red, probably having been disabled when contact had been made with the Shadow Hawk as he had been warned by the Techs that the Fuersturm made lasers were susceptible to the shocks caused by close combat because of the way they were

mounted. Cursing silently the bad luck of losing a quarter of the firepower his Mech had come into the fight with originally the young Mechpilot pushed his throttle forward as he angled the Ostroc to move between two buildings and out of the firing arc of the Wolverine's deadly accurate AC/5 as his already damaged armor would not stand up to it for too long. Adding to his list of problems Greg noted that the heavy Mech was acting sluggish in its responses and it wasn't accelerating like it should as it was running hot. Quickly slapping the override switch for the automatic shutdown the young Mechpilot angled his machine to slip between buildings and away from the Wolverine.

"My God! Did you see...?! I mean...," Franklin spoke in fits and spurts as he tried to rationalize what had just happened. "Jesus! They murdered Roger and Willy! They murdered them! They couldn't fight back anymore and that Wolverine jus-....!"

"I know Frank! I saw it happen!" Greg roared in anger, not solely at his friend but rather at the situation in general and the cruel death that had just been meted out to yet two more of the people that he had been charged with leading. "We all knew the risks. Christ! You and I read the books back when this was all still science fiction! You know damn well that this is the shit Mechwarriors often pull!"

It was true. Back when they had met in ROTC at Duke the two had bonded over a mutual love for the Battletech and Mechwarrior franchises. One of the games they had constantly played was testing each other's knowledge, often asking for the most obscure detail from a novel, scenario pack, or game. One of the rounds of the game had once even involved coming up with the number of cockpits that got kicked or smashed in by a Mech over the course of a novel.

"Jesus, we're going to die," Franklin Oh suddenly stated in a hauntingly calm voice. "We're really going to fucking die out here!"

"Damn it Frank! Don't go to pieces on me!" Moore snarled, having actually seen combat up close and personal before this and the Invasion of Earth while Oh had instead been lucky enough to keep his distance from it until they had arrived on Antallos. "Get me a track on that Griffin! I'll worry about the Wolverine!"

"Are You Fucking Serious?!" Oh screamed, as the Ostroc turned a corner and narrowly avoided the autocannon fire coming from the Wolverine who was in hot pursuit of them. "We gotta get the hell outta here! We can't hope to-...."

"Our *Job* is to hold them off and *Buy* time!" Greg yelled back, mentally cursing that his friend was falling apart now after everything they had already been through. "We're Staying And Doing Our Job! Get It Together *MARINE* And Find Me That Fucking Griffin!"

"Oh God, Oh God," the Korean-American blathered as his fingers danced across his control panels as he tried to fight down his fear and panic. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! We're gonna die, we're gonna die, we're gonna...."

"The Griffin, Where Is It Frank?!" Moore interjected fiercely needing his backseater to start doing his damn job before they got trapped between the two medium Mechs.

Turning the Ostroc sharply the 26 year-old Mechpilot snapped a shot off at the pursuing Wolverine with his medium laser, the beam striking the medium Mech's right shoulder. Cursing under his breath the Brevet-Captain ducked his heavy Mech behind an old warehouse as 6 SRMs corkscrewed in, two of them losing stability and falling short as another went haywire and veered sharply into a building off to the right. The remaining three missiles, however, tore through the upper part of the warehouse's sheet metal roof to strike the Ostroc in its left shoulder. Feeling the impacts almost as if he were the Mech itself Greg fought to keep the 60ton machine upright as falling would be a death sentence.

"Where's the Griffin?!" Greg shouted, the sensor feed on his HUD flickering too erratically to be of any help as he pushed the Ostroc from out behind the warehouse and fired one of his large lasers, hitting the Wolverine in the chest and at the same time feeling a new wave of heat enter the already stifling cockpit.

"I don't know! I don-..., " the backseater cried out before going quiet and then screaming, "He's behind us! He got behind-...!"

The warning clicking in his head Moore was unable to turn the sluggish and hot Ostroc in time. Lined up for a perfect back shot as it came down on its jumpjets the Griffin fired its PPC straight into the back of the 60ton Mech. The artificial bolt of lightning and charged particles was devastating as it burned straight through already damaged armor and hit the engine shielding of the heavy Mech. Greg didn't need to hear the warning alarms or the female voice telling him of the reactor hit, the flush of heat in the cockpit was enough.

"Zzzzt!"

"Gaaaaah!" Franklin Oh screamed as the heat and power surge from the reactor caused the panel he had been typing at to explode in an electrical fury, the tendrils burning through the light insulation of his plugsuits gloves and into his hands and arms.

"Frank?!" Moore yelled in worry as he heard his friend's scream, his worry growing further when no answer came. "Frank!"

Trying to turn his head to see if his backseater was alright the young Mechpilot brought his hands up to shield his face as several more panels shorted out. Around him the young GDI officer felt the Ostroc shudder and quake as the warning tones and lights grew in number. The 60ton Mech was dieing and Greg knew it as his HUD shorted out taking with it the indicators for his weapons and armor status.

"Well that's bad," the young Marine turned GDI officer noted, a hint of fatalistic sarcasm in his voice before he cut the power feed to his helmet to prevent the squealing squawk of the com unit's demise from deafening him.

Looking out the cockpit glass the young Brevet-Captain noted that the Wolverine was closing in. The fact that neither it nor the Griffin seemed to be firing at him seemed to suggest that they were preparing to deliver the coup de grace to his dieing Ostroc in a far more up close and personal manner. Considering the Wolverine pilot's action against Roger and Willy when their Thunderbolt had lain stricken it was more than likely the medium Mech was maneuvering to crush the heavier Mech's cockpit and save ammo.

Unable to tell if he had any power running to his weapons as more of the cockpit systems went dead, Moore sighed to himself, "Well, I guess there's only one thing left to do."

Reaching over with one hand to type a short code into a keypad next to his secondary monitor, Moore felt a toothy grin crack his dry lips as the number 30 appeared and then shifted to 29, 28.... Looking through the cockpit's glass the young Mechpilot reached back over to his throttle and control sticks, his grin growing wider as he felt the Ostroc stir slightly at his command.

"Alright then," the blond haired man stated as he pushed his throttle forward, counting backwards in his head..

Tearing through the thin metal of the warehouse the Ostroc angled straight towards the oncoming Wolverine. Closing the distance the dieing heavy Mech shuddered as it was pushed to its limit. Reacting to the sluggishly charging Mech the Wolverine brought its AC/5 up and began to fire, shells digging into what little armor remained on the 60ton Ostroc's torso. Trying to keep the Ostroc upright as the Wolverine unleashed its SRMs, three of them impacting the heavy Mech's right shoulder, Greg felt the 60ton Mech lurch violently as its right arm blew off. Knowing that there was no time to correct for the loss of the appendage as the Ostroc began to fall Moore reached over and pulled hard on the ejection lever, silently hoping that the Mech's head was angled enough to toss him and Frank clear and not into any of the nearby buildings.

With barely any warning Brevet-Captain Gregory Moore felt himself jolted hard as the explosive bolts around his Mech's head fired just before his command chair's rockets fired. Slammed back into his chair the man screwed his blue eyes shut as the rush of wind struck his face as he and his chair soared free of the dieing Mech, 1st Lieutenant Franklin Oh's unconscious form following closely in his own command chair. Arcing up into the air and over several buildings the young Mechpilot continued to count down in his head as his parachute deployed, jolting him further. He was waiting ever so patiently for....

"Ka-BOOOOOOOM!!!!!!!!!!!"

Two seconds off of his internal count the Ostroc blew. Falling slowly, gripping the straps of his parachute's harness, Moore was unprepared for the shockwave that hit him. Gripping the straps of his chute the young GDI officer fought to regain control as he quickly approached the abandoned street. Hitting the ground harder than he had anticipated, the blond haired man felt the air get violently knocked out of his lungs and heard at least two of his ribs *'pop'*, though that sound might have been from his neurohelmet cracking as his head bounced on the ground from his hard landing. It was hard to tell.

"Oh...Damn," Greg wheezed as he lay there, stunned for a few seconds before his chute filled with a gust of air and jerked him causing pain to shoot through his chest.

Levering himself up with is arms the Mechpilot hit the quick release on his parachute just before he was dragged a few yards. Collapsing into a wheezing heap on the ground Moore noted the taste of the dust on the ground mixed with the bloody spittle in his mouth. Feeling almost content to just lie there and pass out, considering he had busted at least two ribs, was having trouble breathing, and possibly had a concussion, the 26 year-old felt such thoughts leave him rather quickly as he felt the steady 'thud' of an approaching Mech's footfalls. There were only two Mechs, well two if his little suicide charge had failed to take out the Wolverine, in the area and encountering either out here in the open street would not be a good idea especially considering he only had his standard issue M9 Beretta strapped to his right leg and three spare clips of 9mm ammo for it.

Trying to pushing himself up on his hands and knees, his breath coming back in rasping coughs, the young GDI officer collapsed back down onto the dusty ground. His vision was swimming and the only thing he could be certain of was that he heard the ponderous footfalls of a Mech not too far from where he lay.

"Come on Marine," the 26 year-old Moore berated himself as he spat some blood and teeth chips out as he pushed himself up again. "You need to get up. You must get up!"

Rising up shakily the young GDI officer stumbled and crawled in order to get out of the center of the street. Coming to rest against the sandstone façade of an old, seemingly abandoned tenement the 26 year-old finally got a chance to look around the area he had landed in. Seeing nothing but crumbling buildings the plugsuit wearing man was about to turn and try to make his way into the building he was leaning against when his ears caught the distinct sound of cloth snapping in the breeze. Looking up Greg Moore felt the color drain from his face as he spied his friend and backseater.

"Frank," Moore whispered as he saw the condition his buddy was in, forgetting for a moment the plodding footfalls of a Mech approaching the area.

Nearly 8 meters up off the ground Franklin Oh hung in his harness, his parachute having caught on the sharp corner of the building's roof. Hanging there, swinging slightly in the breeze, the young Korean-American's head remained drooped in unconsciousness. However, the thing that caught Moore's immediate attention was the blood covering the front of the other man's plugsuit as it poured forth from where his face had been smashed, most likely from when Franklin Oh had struck the roof of the building. From where he was standing Greg couldn't be sure if his friend was unconscious or dead.

"Jesus," the young Marine turned GDI officer swore out loud. "I'll get you down! You hear me Frank?! I'll get you down!"

His left arm wrapped protectively around his aching ribs, pain rippling through him whenever he took a breath, Moore quickly repeated, over and over again, his promise of retrieving his friend as he looked for some way to get into the tenement. However, his vision kept fading in and out as he tried to remain standing causing him to stumble and fall several times.

"Ok, definitely have a concussion," the Brevet-Captain grunted as he fought the painful ache in his chest as he leaned against the building in an effort to stay upright. "Gotta stay awake though."

"Hey! You alright?! Sir?!"

Hearing the accented voice Greg turned his head to look down the alleyway to his right. Standing there with a Heckler & Koch G36 or some variant of it was a infantryman in the dusty tan combat vest and fatigues of the GDI, the German Flag riding high on his right shoulder's sleeve. The trooper looked rather fresh-faced underneath all of the grime, dirt, and the greasy camo paint on his face; possibly being only 19 or 20 years old. However, at that moment Moore didn't really care, he was just glad to see a friendly face at the moment. Letting out a short laugh the Mechpilot slowly collapsed, sliding down the side of the sand scoured building until his rump hit the ground.

"Oi, Herr Hauptman!" the young GDI infantryman started in his accented English, rushing over as he saw the slightly older man go down. "Hey! Are...You...O-K?! Can...You...Hear...Me?!"

His vision swimming and unable to fight the fatigue that was washing over him the 26 year-old Brevet- Captain could barely make out the words be spoken to him and the shouts being directed back down the alleyway from which the trooper had come from. Passing out, Moore was unaware of the other members of the squad running down the narrow confines of the alleyway. Being loaded onto a makeshift 'field' stretcher of a rain poncho and two collapsible spars the Mechpilot found only the blissful nothing of unconsciousness.

GDI Base, Port Krin
Antallos, Periphery
January 25, 2007/3022

Stepping out of his bathroom, a towel in his hands as he dried his face, Greg Moore tried to brush away the lingering thoughts that troubled him. The timely arrival of Hound Squad, a sister squad of Fox squad and one of the other infantry units tagged to the GDI Expeditionary Force from the German Bundeswehr, had been a Godsend. It had been because of them that Moore and his backseater, 1st Lieutenant Franklin Oh had not gotten killed by the Griffin that had stalked the area looking for them after Moore's suicidal charge and detonation of the Ostroc had crippled the Wolverine and forced

its pilot to scram its reactor or face the large fusion engine exploding. Thankfully the German Infantry had done a damn fine job of getting the two Americans someplace safe before Mechwarrior Christine Miller of the Buron Cavalry and four Merkavas, sent as backup by Major Staedele, had put down the Medium Mech that had still been a threat to the GDI rear area.

"Still got a concussion, three broken ribs, and severe bruising to my torso though," the 26 year-old thought as he stood for a moment with the towel draped across his neck. *"At least they were able to save Frank in the process of rescuing me."*

1st Lieutenant Franklin Oh had suffered a severe concussion, a broken nose, broken left cheek bone, a broken jaw, the loss of several of his front teeth, and severe electrical feedback. It has all been due to the discharge he had caught when the panel he had been working at had overloaded and the fact that he had been unconscious when ejected from the dying Ostroc. The damage to his face could be repaired with cosmetic surgery, but the damage to his hands was the greatest concern. The electricity had been enough to melt the gloves of the plugsuit in areas and had caused some major electrical and contact burns for the Korean-American, so much so that the GDI doctors had been forced to surgically cut away the melted gloves and several layers of dead skin around the burns. Frank had been lucky not to have lost his hands or any of his fingers, though the loss of tissue and the way the electricity had destroyed certain nerves meant he would require a long recovery time and intense physical therapy to even be able to hold something as simple as a fork and spoon again. It was one of the reasons why Frank had been on one of the first Droppers back home to Earth.

"Though I wish he were here now," Greg thought solemnly, missing his friend.

Walking over to the dresser that was pushed up against the wall he found immediately a red shirt with 'USMC' written across it in yellow lettering. Tossing the towel off to the side the 26 year-old pulled the t-shirt on over his head before finding a pair of black mesh shorts to throw on over his skivvies. It was 0430 hours Antallos time and that meant that even the early risers, the senior Non-Coms who would

awaken many of the GDI troopers in all of the makeshift barracks around the spaceport for a good round of early morning PT, were not yet up and moving and wouldn't be for at least another 30 or 45 minutes.

That struck Greg fine as he found a pair of socks to wear. He preferred doing PT alone anyways, a privilege he had gained upon rising to the rank of Captain. At that thought the young blond haired man shifted his eyes in the dim pre-dawn light to the small velvet cases that were on top of his dresser. In the first case lay the double brass bars that he had been presented not too long after the Battle for Port Krin. Colonel Kurita and General Davis had confirmed his battlefield promotion and made it official. However, the other case was what bothered Greg the most. In that case lay the Navy Cross that had been presented to him in the awards ceremony a few weeks after the battle.

The award was the second highest that a United States Marine could receive and alongside the Distinguished Service Cross that Tony Dansel had received as the same ceremony, was the highest award that any member of the GDI Expeditionary Force had been awarded. Quite a number of medals, commendations, and awards had been given out to a number of members of the Expeditionary Force. Quite a number of them were posthumously awarded, like the Silver Stars for 1st Lieutenants Roger Bligh and William Matzer, two of Moore's own. The awards ceremony had occurred a few weeks after the battle for Port Krin had ended, but that wasn't the end of it. Everyday for the past few months it seemed, new awards were coming in and being presented to the veterans of the Expeditionary Force. It seemed that every country that had contributed troops to the force, as well as several who had not contributed directly, wanted to match the decorations of its fellows. Each member of the CSN it seemed wanted its own heroes recognized along with wanting to recognize the accomplishments of those who had fought in their service from 'recognized allies' in the GDI.

Moore frowned at that. Over the past few months he had lost count of how many medals he, Tony Dansel, and several other so-called 'heroes' of Port Krin had received. He, at least to his own mind, hadn't done anything heroic. It was rather cliché, but the young Captain felt

that he had simply done his job and been lucky enough to survive doing it.

"But politicians need their heroes," Moore muttered to himself as he finished putting on a pair of sneakers and walked over to the door of his room, recalling something his Grandfather, a distinguished Marine in his own right had once said. "At least General Davis hasn't sent me back yet."

It was something that every veteran in the Expeditionary Force feared on some level or other. A number of politicians back on Earth were clamoring for the GDI Expeditionary Force to return home, or at least send a number of its more 'distinguished' personnel back. Supposedly the reason for it would be to 'boost' morale and help strengthen the image of the GDI and CSN in the public eye as the 'heroic' Expeditionary Force went on a series of public tours. The whole thing stank to high heaven of power politics and political swagger to Moore, and from the conversations he had been in with Dansel and several other 'heroes' they all agreed on that point.

"Luckily for us the General and Colonel are keeping the politicians at bay... for the most part at least," the young Captain noted silently as he narrowed his eyes and stepped out into the harsh fluorescent light of the hallway before closing his door behind him. Two of Moore's own, Lieutenants Mark Eckel And Carol Wienberg, had gotten tapped to return home as trainers and to help promote the unity of the GDI. That had come down as a direct order from Davis. *"Not too much of a surprise there seeing as how getting stars and birds on your shoulder requires you to start playing politics anyways. At least the General and Colonel are doing it for the right reasons."*

It was no secret amongst the Expeditionary Force that General Davis and Colonel Kurita were butting heads with the 'established' militaries back home. The GDI right now was a hot topic of debate. There were questions of how it should be funded, how it should be expanded, which countries should be contributing to it, how those contributions should be made, and how it should be structured in the future among numerous others. Leading a hugely successful campaign had bought Davis and Kurita a great deal of clout and so far the two were using it to keep things in check, keep the politicians and home

generals at bay, and expand the GDI Expeditionary Force as it should be...a unified force representing every major part of Earth.

"Damn politicians don't get it," Greg swore quietly as he began to stretch slightly. "We may have some advantages, but it won't last forever. We're still just a small fish in a damn big ocean."

Shaking his head at the thought of how disunity would only leave Earth vulnerable to predation from outside, the young Captain began to walk briskly down the hallway. He had a long, punishing workout to begin before he had to report for duty later. Hopefully it would clear his head like it usually did, especially considering that his task for the day was rather special. It wouldn't do to allow such things to cloud his mind or be displayed during the fulfillment of his duties. No, circumstances and his honor as a professional soldier demanded that he be at his best for it even if what he truly desired was another combat assignment and a new Mech to ride in instead.

"Ours is not to question why...," the young officer noted with a dry, sarcastic wit as he recalled one of his favorite lines from Tennyson. "Ours is but to do and...."

Leaving the second half of that famous line unfinished the young Marine turned GDI officer walked down the hallway to the stairwell, his mind now focused squarely upon starting his morning PT.

Memorial Cemetery, Port Krin
Antallos, Periphery
January 25, 2007/3022

Standing crisply in the new GDI Dress Uniform that he had been issued a month ago Captain Greg Moore fought down the urge to tug at the stiff neck collar. It wasn't that different from his regular USMC Dress Uniform, but damn if the heat of Antallos wasn't already beginning to get nasty even if it was only 1000hours. The new uniform was a bit too warm given that it was a dark navy blue, almost black, in color and the desert conditions meant the sun and temperature were already getting nearly unbearable even this early

in the day. However, for a funeral, such burdens could be easily shouldered. Checking to make sure one last time that the braided red cord that circled over and under his right shoulder before crossing over to where his tunic buttoned up the front was properly placed and that his salad board and other awards were all neatly placed as they should be. This was a solemn event and it wouldn't do to have anything out of place.

Only a few steps away from the 26 year-old stood six men and women similarly clad in the new uniform, though each of them wore the white chevrons of an enlisted man or of a non-com and the white cord of an infantryman or the forest green cord of an armored vehicle crew member rather than the red cord of a Mechpilot. The pallbearers looked sharp with their well polished boots and brass, the sun glinting off of the black bills of their white covers. Inside the small graveyard stood fourteen other similarly dressed GDI troopers, seven of whom stood at ease with rifles as Sergeant Major Tony Ruckard formerly of the British Royal Marines, kept one eye closely upon them and the other firmly upon Moore. Opposite the ceremonial squad stood a small brass quintet with a single trooper carrying a silver bugle standing just off to the side.

"Honor Guard, Atten'hut!" the young GDI Captain ordered as the small convoy of Hummers began to pull up. "Salute."

The response to the order was immediate. Right hands rose quickly as in the graveyard Sgt. Ruckard directed his men to do the same with their rifles. Holding the salute firmly Greg watched as the different people attending the funeral exited from the Hummers that had been following the lead vehicle, many of whom were just regular GDI troopers attending out of a sense of honor and respect for a fellow soldier though there were a few key notables in attendance. General Davis and Colonel Kurita both looked immaculate in their GDI uniforms. Next to them was Ambassador Smith in a well pressed black suit accompanied by the Draconis Combine and Federated Suns delegations. The Combine's Ambassador, Shanti Taro Kurita, was dressed in an immaculate white kimono while her young aid Alicia Kurita stood dressed in the white dress uniform of the DCMS. Off handedly from the time he had spent at Okinawa and in the Kendo Club at Duke, Greg recalled that white was the color of death in

Japanese society. Both women walked with a sense of solemn purpose, paying honor to the fallen that lay in the graves marked by simple white headstones. In sharp contrast to the two women Carlos Davion strode forward into the graveyard in the royal blue uniform of the Davion Light Guard, a confident swagger to his steps as the traditional cavalry spurs attached to his riding boots, the sign of a Davion Mechwarrior, jingled lightly with every step. Even Precentor Long, looking incredibly out of place in his ComStar robes, was present, though he seemed ready to pass-out given how red in the face he was and how his young aides were fanning him and trying to get him to drink some water.

Moore really hoped that the man didn't suddenly have a heart attack. One, it would be rather annoying to have the man keel over at a GDI and CSN event, not to mention politically bothersome. Two, it would possibly mean that a far more competent individual would be appointed to Long's place. Having started out as an Intel officer, before 'volunteering' for a special assignment a few years before the attack upon Auckland, Moore was of the mindset that the devil you knew was far better than the devil you didn't know. Long was rather incompetent or at least that was what Greg had gathered in his conversations with Captain Samantha Swift. Speaking of Swift, the steely eyed and tough as nails head of GDI Military Intelligence on Antallos had just thrown him a nod.

"Wonder what that might imply?" Greg wondered as he watched the other Captain walk with the GDI party further into the graveyard.

Though he may only be 26 years old and have only been an Intel Officer for a few years he had participated in some rather interesting assignments since he had gotten his commission at the age of 21 and had learned that in the intelligence business no gesture was without its double meanings. Where many would've seen the nod as simply being a gesture of respect, familiarity, and/or approval of the way he was carrying out his duty, Moore knew differently. Samantha Swift was an intelligence officer to the core. Every gesture she made was calculated beforehand and designed to convey things that were not necessarily evident to laymen.

Deciding that it would be better to contemplate the gesture from the

elder Intel Officer, Moore focused back upon watching the small crowd of people that were gathering in the graveyard. He was actually surprised to see as many people here as there were, though this was the first fallen soldier from the Terran Hegemony that they had come across seeing as how the majority of the other corpses had been either mercs or pirates or had belonged to either the Draconis Combine or Federated Suns considering the history of conflict on Antallos. Looking over the crowd without moving his head in the slightest, merely shifting his eyes and scanning with his peripherals, Moore noted that there were even a few regular civilians present. Most likely they were members of the salvage crew who had found the Orion that the fallen Hegemony Mechwarrior had been entombed in.

With the most important people currently on Antallos in the cemetery Moore waited for a good 20 count in order to let them be seated and for any others to find their designated places. His count finally coming to an end the young Captain raised his left arm slightly to just about his waist before making a fist. It was the sign that the pallbearers and the rest of the Honor Guard had been waiting for. Silently releasing their salutes the six pallbearers stepped to the back of the first Humvee, a modified version that had a set of double doors on its tail end. Opening the doors revealed a simple coffin draped in the recreated flag of the Terran Hegemony. As the casket began to be moved out into the light of the day the dulcet tones of 'Going Home' slowly filtered out from the brass quintet.

Standing to the back of the small crowd that had gathered in the graveyard Remus Lupin felt his breath catch in his chest as he spied the flag draped coffin being carried on the shoulders of the six pallbearers. The colors of the old Terran Hegemony were something that he, as a former Clansman and member of the Wolf Dragoons, had been taught to venerate as one of the holiest of relics. Incidentally he couldn't help but wonder whether or not the flag was a recreation or an original.

"It has to be a recreation," the Wolfnet agent thought calmly as he watched the solemn procession. *"Though considering how little we*

actually know of the origins of this CSN and GDI...."

It had been one of the theory's floating around Port Krin and one he had picked up on early in his deployment here. The popular rumor was that the GDI and CSN were from colony worlds of the former Terran Hegemony, colony worlds that had survived the Amaris Coup and Succession Wars while being lost to time and cut off from the rest of the Inner Sphere. Some of the more extravagant variations of this theory purported that the CSN and GDI were returning to reestablish the Hegemony and bring about a new Star League and a new golden age for humanity.

While Lupin would dismiss the part about reestablishing the Star League he could not necessarily refute the idea that the CSN and GDI had the potential to lead the Inner Sphere into a technological renaissance. They certainly had the lostech to do so, if not more than enough as he had only seen what they had brought here to Antallos and could only imagine what they might have on their homeworlds and capital world. He didn't dare give an estimate yet on what level of tech they had. He needed more info first before he would even begin to make a conservative estimate. It was one of the reasons why he would soon be requesting additional agents from Colonel Wolf, there was only so much he could do on his own right now.

"At least I don't have to follow that silly rumor of them being Kerensky's people returned," Remus thought with a silent chuckle.

That had been another popular rumor and theory going around as to who the GDI and CSN really were. Remus found it rather ironic that he almost knew for a fact that they couldn't possibly be related to himself, the Dragoons, or the Clans. The members of the GDI and CSN that he had so far come into contact with bore no resemblance at all to Clan society or even to the way the Dragoons carried themselves. He personally could recall just how hard he had needed to train to break himself of the habits and mannerisms that marked him as being of the Clans before coming to the Inner Sphere. Even then he and the other members of Wolfnet had needed almost another full year to completely learn how to actually blend in with the peoples of the Inner Sphere. For the GDI and CSN to be in a similar vein to the Dragoons would mean that one of the Clans

would've needed to secretly go against the directives of the Grand Council, build up a secret reconnaissance unit, train and equip that unit, and then insert them into the Periphery all around the time that the Dragoons had been doing the same. It wasn't impossible that such a thing could happen, but it was highly improbable that it could occur.

"But then that begs the question of how the others will view the GDI and CSN?" Remus thought, wrestling with questions and concerns that had risen up as he had delved further into the mystery that was the GDI and CSN. **"If these 'Motherloaders' are truly a former set of Terran Hegemony or Star League colonies that have been able to escape the perversions and machinations of the Scavenger Lords then it would be only right that we assist them and defend them."**

Being what would have been deemed a Warden were he still in Clan space Remus Lupin found himself frowning as he suddenly thought as to what the Crusader's reaction might be should the knowledge of the GDI and CSN reach them. While many of the Warden Clans might agree with his own thoughts the Crusaders would most likely only see another faction to be conquered. Worse yet would be if the Crusaders were able to convince those still on the fence along with a number of Wardens that the GDI and CSN could be a potential threat to the Clans one day if left unchecked. Things had been tense enough back in the homeworlds as it was without more fuel being thrown onto the fire.

"Hopefully the Colonel will know exactly what should be done," Remus thought as he focused his attention back onto the funeral procession as it had finally reached the gravesite and the brass quintet had finished playing. *"Then again maybe we were too quick to erase the data linking us back home. Khan Ward may need to be informed of this development."*

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake," Captain

Jonathan Krist, Episcopalian Chaplain of the GDI Expeditionary Force and member of the Canadian Armed Forces, intoned solemnly as he recited the 23rd Psalm. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

"Amen."

The response came naturally from Captain Gregory Moore's lips along with many others gathered for the funeral of the fallen Terran Hegemony Mechwarrior who was finally being laid to rest centuries after he had fallen in battle. The man's dog tags had been nearly impossible to read as it was mainly an electronic chip built into a plastic tag. Having been baked in the heat of Antallos and mummified in the makeshift tomb of the Orion's cockpit the simple ID tag had been rendered completely useless because of the centuries of time that had passed. The computer core of the Orion, despite being an example of what he and others on Earth had noted as BT Ragnarok proofing, had been only partially salvageable. The majority of the data on the core had been destroyed when the Mech had fallen and been consumed by the desert centuries ago. While the core still possessed some data on how the Orion functioned the data regarding its last pilot had been lost, possibly forever.

"We gather here, now, to lay to rest the corporeal remains of our fellow soldier," Chaplain Krist spoke calmly. "Having fallen in battle we pray that his soul may find comfort in the embrace of the Lord God and that he has been reunited with the family and friends he left behind. Though we do not know him other than as a body we see in him ourselves and our fellow soldiers. We are reminded of the duty and responsibilities that we all share as soldiers and that we too may one day be called upon to give our lives in the name of that duty and responsibility."

Stepping back slightly Captain Krist made room as General Davis stepped forward. The General was immaculate in his new GDI uniform. However, today the senior officer on world had forgone the wearing of any of the medals and awards he had earned prior to

taking up his position in the GDI. It was a subtle sign that would be lost to the foreign dignitaries who knew naught of Earth. To the GDI troopers present however, it was a firm signal to them of the General's loyalty to them and to the cause of the GDI in defending Earth from all threats. Stepping forward to where the six pallbearers held the Terran Hegemony flag outstretched over the simple casket that housed the earthly remains of Mechwarrior that remained unknown the General snapped off a crisp salute not to the flag itself, but to the man who had fallen in the service of it; a brother soldier.

Dropping his right hand back to his side Davis pulled a small book from the pocket of his tunic, a book whose pages were weathered and yellowed with age, a book that had seen many a funeral, both official ceremonies and the impromptu goodbyes given upon the field of battle. Opening the book to a section that whose pages were dog-eared and worn the General began to read out loud,

"In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields."

Closing the book General Davis stepped back as Captain Krist took his position at the head of the casket.

"You have fought the good fight, you have finished the race, you have kept the faith," the Episcopalian Minister and GDI Captain solemnly

stated, paraphrasing 2 Timothy 4:7 for its implications regarding the end of one's life and the fulfillment of one's duty. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection into eternal life. May you find peace in the embrace of the Lord God, most High, and solace in knowledge that you fulfilled your duty to your nation and to your fellow soldiers."

As those words finished every member of the GDI military, except the pallbearers holding taught the flag of the Terran Hegemony, snapped to attention and saluted. Right hands up crisp and firm in the how they shaded the faces of the GDI soldiers, all of them having come from different nations of 'Mother' Earth and yet all dedicated to the singular purpose of her defense, they stood firm and unshakable. Holding their salutes none noticed the small nod that Captain Moore gave...none except those who were looking for it.

Off to the side of the graveyard with his riflemen in perfect line Sergeant major Tony Ruckard caught the subtle shift in his superior's head and immediately called out, "Honor Guard, Atten'hut!"

Together as one the four men and three women of the GDI bearing rifles snapped to attention.

"Standby...Ready," the Sergeant Major ordered, the seven soldiers all turning in unison halfway to their right and bringing their rifles up to port arms as they spread their feet to be exactly 10 inches apart from each other in order to obtain a firm and steady stance in preparation of firing. "Load."

With left hands firmly holding their rifles the seven GDI troopers brought their hands up in perfect synchronization to rake the bolts of their rifles and load the first of three blank rounds into the firing chamber.

"Ready...Aim," Ruckard commanded, the riflemen switching off the safeties of their weapons before bringing their rifles up to their shoulders, the butt neatly planted where it should be as the muzzle was aimed at a perfect 45 degree angle from the horizontal. "Fire."

"Bang!"

The sound of the first shot was immediate after the command had been given. A few of the civilians who had gathered, including Precentor Long, flinched at the report of the weapons. However, all of the GDI and CSN personnel along with the Kurita and Davion delegations remained steadfast and strong.

"Ready...Aim," Ruckard ordered once again. "Fire."

"Bang!"

"Ready...Aim," the middle aged British Non-com ordered for a third and final time. "Fire."

"Bang!"

"Cease Fire," the gruff Non-com ordered after the third shot rang out. "Ready. Present...Arms!"

With those commands the riflemen of the honor guard immediately safed their weapons and shifted them to port arms before turning to face forward fully, bringing up their weapons directly in front of them in full presentation; a final sign of respect to their fallen brother soldier. Almost immediately as the command to 'Present Arms' was enacted at the other point of the graveyard the single bugler raised his silver horn to his lips and began to play the slow, dulcet tones of a tune known most commonly as Taps.

Hearing the mournful tones of Taps echoing off of the stillness of the graveyard on Antallos. Remus Lupin had to almost forcefully stop himself from giving his own Wolf Dragoons salute. The simple tune, he knew, had originally been written by a long dead general from a civil war that had once torn apart the long gone United States of America. The general, a freeborn like himself, named Daniel Adams Butterfield had penned the tune as a tribute to the soldiers that had fought and died under his command after a long and horrendous battle.

"Fading light dims the sight, and a star gems the sky, gleaming bright. From afar drawing nigh – Falls the night," the Wolfnet agent whispered low to himself. "Day is done, gone the sun, From the lake, from the hills, from the sky; All is well, safely rest, Great Father is nigh."

"What's that yer muttering Remus?" Bob, the hidden agent's boss at the salvage company asked, having only come along in the hopes of gaining perhaps a few more contracts from the GDI.

"A farewell that was once put to this melody," the former Clanner answered before finishing his recollection of the unofficial lyrics. "Then good night, peaceful night, Till the light of the dawn shineth bright; Great Father is near, do not Fear – Friend, good night."

"Sounds depressing," Bob noted without much of a care.

"I find it comforting, as did the original composer," Remus answered as he watched the GDI pallbearers carefully and, at the same time, precisely fold the flag of the Terran Hegemony into its traditional folded, triangular shape before laying it upon the center of the simple casket. "Some of my brethren do not care for such things anymore and would prefer to distance themselves from them."

"I don't particularly care 'bout your family situation," the gruff old salvage guru noted with a hint of annoyance in his voice. "So long as it don't interfere with your work."

"I try not to let it," Lupin noted, not being entirely untruthful with the statement. "But then some of the members of my...'extended' family are rather strong in their opinions."

"Whatever," the older man noted, turning away from where he stood in the graveyard as the funeral broke up.

Standing there for a moment Remus Lupin made several mental notes as he took in all that he saw and had seen. These people of the GDI and the CSN were unlike any others he or any other Dragoon had encountered in the Inner Sphere. They honored the fallen of those they did not know and had never met in the same manner they

would their own dead and showed honor and respect to those that were deemed to be honorable. It was a great deal to take in and think about.

"All the more reason to send word to the Colonel and request that further agents be sent to assist me in this task," Remus silently noted. "We need to learn more about these 'Motherloaders' and their GDI and CSN. They could prove to be the allies that Khan Ward and the other Wardens desire and directed us to find in the effort to stave off the folly of the Crusaders. Hmm, I wonder what will the Colonel think of all this?"

Several yards away, mingled in with the crowd of dignitaries, GDI troopers, and CSN personnel a woman in her mid-thirties stood silently, her brown eyes slowly following the Wolfnet agent from behind her large, dark sunglasses. She wore the identification badge of one who was attached to the CSN Ambassador's office and indeed working as an assistant to Ambassador Smith was part of her cover. Her true role, however, had been given to her by Mary Pat Foley herself before shipping out with the Ambassador. Sarah Murdock as she was called, had been given several jobs all revolving around keeping the ambassador safe and maintaining the security of Earth. Remus Lupin was a name that had crossed her desk when his name had been tagged as being 'suspicious'. Seeing him here had been a slight surprise, though now that she thought about it she wasn't overly surprised considering that he had been part of the salvage team that had found the body. Such dedication and respect was lauded in military circles, but to her it merely indicated that perhaps she had found a potential asset to recruit. She would need to think about it and run it past Samantha Swift, her GDI Military Intelligence counterpart, later on.

"A good job as usual Sergeant Major," Captain Gregory Moore noted solemnly.

"Thank you Sir," Sergeant Major Tony Ruckard stated, his Cockney accent coloring his voice. "The lads and lasses deserve the credit though, damn fine lot they are. Disciplined and trained so fine I barely have to do a thing."

"Hmm...still, make sure they get a round then after they get off duty later and let them know that I'm proud of them," the young 26 year-old remarked, knowing from the lessons taught to him by his grandfather that it was always a good thing to build a strong rapport with one's subordinates and that no soldier worth his salt refused a free drink. "You as well. Have the bartender send me the tab for the first round and make sure that it is *only* for the first round. I may have gotten bumped up to being a Captain, but that hardly means I'm raking in the money."

Letting out a hearty chuckle at that Ruckard responded, "Aye, I'll make sure Captain...and I'll make sure that the lads and lasses raise the first pint to ya, good man that you are."

Rolling his eyes at that Moore simply grunted and returned the salute given to him by the senior Non-com as the man was dismissed from the gravesite. Moore on the other hand, knew that someone needed to stay for a little while longer. It was necessary to make certain that the final aspects of the burial were handled properly. It wouldn't do to go through the entire ceremony and then have the deceased treated badly when he was actually being lowered into the ground. It would besmirch both Moore's honor as a soldier to have his charge wrongfully treated, not to mention that it would give the GDI and CSN a political and media black-eye, as well as ruin the proper send off granted to his own departed comrades by allowing a fellow soldier to be mishandled as he was laid to rest.

"Captain Moore."

Turning slightly at his name Greg immediately snapped to attention and rendered a quick salute. Standing before him was his commanding officer, General Davis. What was slightly surprising was that the man did not have Ambassador Smith, Colonel Kurita, or any of the foreign delegations in tow.

"At ease Captain," the elder man ordered as he nodded in return to the salute. "You did a fine job today, did a fine job on all of the others you presided over."

"Twelve, Sir," the young Captain noted slowly. "I've presided over a dozen military funerals here on Antallos so far."

"Hmm, yes, you've been assigned to that task ever since you got cleared for active duty again," the General commented as he rested his hand behind his back. "I bet you're just chomping at the bit to get back to piloting a Mech again, aren't you?"

"Begging your pardon, General Sir," Greg began, trying to be as polite as possible without seeming to kiss ass and at the same time trying to hold down his frustration at not having been assigned as new ride yet when nearly every other Mechpilot who had lost a Mech had already done so. "The position of head of ceremonies is adequate, though I won't deny that I wish to be reassigned to a combat position in the near future."

"I thought as much," Davis noted calmly. "Truth be told Moore, I'm directly to blame for your current assignment."

"Sir?" the blond United States Marine turned GDI officer stated in slight amount of surprise.

"Yes, I've purposefully kept you in this position, just as I've kept several of your fellow 'heroes' in similar ceremonial positions," the General remarked offhandedly. "The politicians and the brass back home are breathing down my and Chou's necks. They want you all back home to help them raise political capital or in the case of the home military, raise new training units. While the former disgusts me as a soldier, I can't dismiss the need for the latter."

"Am I being transferred back to Earth Sir?" Captain Moore asked only a small bit of hesitation in his voice as he knew that such a thing was very much probable.

"No Moore, you aren't," Davis stated assuredly. "I need you out here along with as many veterans of the battle as I can keep. They might not realize it back home, but the battle for Port Krin was only a small taste of what we are likely to face in the future. All of us here in the Expeditionary Force know damn well that sooner or later somebody is going to come back this way looking to get what Earth has...and

like before they probably ain't going to be polite about it."

Greg nodded in agreement. It had been a major topic of discussion amongst himself and the numerous other officers and senior Non-coms. He, Tony Dansel, and a number of other GDI personnel who had extensive knowledge of the Battletech and Mechwarrior franchise had been key in explaining some of the subtle nuances of the various Inner Sphere powers and how each posed a different threat to Earth.

"The GDI needs to grow, to expand into what Earth needs in order to not only survive but thrive," the older man noted with calm strength. "We need to become a truly united force that can kick the teeth in of whoever decides that they want to try and subjugate Earth and take what is ours. We've all seen that force develop here on Antallos with you veterans. That is why Chou and I have been trying to keep as many of you here as possible. The lot of you are exactly what we need to help the reinforcements and replacements we are supposed to be getting to settle in and work together as a cohesive unit."

Meeting the General's blue eyes with his own Greg Moore, Captain in the GDI, Mechpilot, United States Marine Corp Captain, American, and Earthling felt a jolt run through him. There was pure, unadulterated conviction in those dark brown eyes. It wasn't a conviction that one would associate with madness, but rather with strength and purpose.

"I want you to let all of the others you meet up with on a weekly basis that I've heard their griping about their assignments. I want you to let them know that there is a plan and they are where they need to be at the moment and that I take care of my people regardless of where they come from originally," Davis stated firmly. "You and the others are going to help make sure that the reinforcements and replacements we get are properly brought into the fold and made into what we need them to be. It won't be quick and it won't be easy and that is why I need your help, son. Yours and all of the others as well. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes Sir." Greg returned sharply his hand rising up to salute his General. "We'll get it done Sir."

"Good, that is what I was hoping for you to tell me," Davis stated as he turned to begin walking away. "Oh, and Captain...."

"Yes Sir?" Moore responded.

"Make sure to tell them that in return for their dedication I'm going to make *damn* sure that you and all of the others get the assignments that they desire," the older man stated before walking away. "You just need to be patient a little while longer."

"We will Sir," Captain Greg Moore stated firmly before turning back to make certain that his current task was finished properly so that he could concentrate upon his new one fully.

Suddenly, the day seemed far more tolerable. It was as the General had said, all they needed to do was be patient for a little while longer.

hajj

February 28 2007/3022

Invader class jumpship Scimitar

Two jumps away from Antallos

Captain Ismail Al'Heran entered the "wardrobe" where his troops had gathered. He looked his warriors in the eyes and said "You all asked yourself why I decided to skip a good contract and move to this shithole of Antallos."

"Yeah, it'd better be a damn good reason!"

"Yes. It's not only about money. It's about this."
He started the life TV feed from the battle.

"Al Jazeera? Which Island..." suddenly there was silence as text was blended in "Battle for Mecca continues"

Several light and medium mechs were fighting against heavier machines in front of the great Mosque and the Kaaba. "Allahu ak...!" with those last words a light mech exploded and it was clear the pilot had no chance of survival. There was no doubt those mechs would lose. The news ticker at the lower screen, all but ignored, read "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques declares Jihad. + + + Hezbollah, Hamas, Fatah and Al Qaeda declare unilateral truce with Israel and anyone else."

It included a few minutes of TV coverage more and then switched to the face of Mullah Aladdin Al Azim, becoming a standard inner sphere holo feed. "My name is Aladdin Al Azim... Hajji Aladdin Al Azim." he smiled. "God is merciful; he gave us back what we missed all those centuries... the holy cities of old. I'm standing here in front of the great Mosque in Mecca where many of my men are buried. They died as they defended the most holy place in the universe. Only a few of us are left, and there can only be one reason Allah wanted us to stay alive. To get the message out to the faithful. Let me give you a walk through the city."

A full two hours later, every single member of the crew was

convinced and the feed switched to Aladdin kneeling down on the place in front of the Kaaba as he spoke with a humble, if strong voice

"Merciful father,
you took away from us the most holy of places. Over generations and centuries we lost hope of ever getting it back as we were sinners and humanity stained the stars with blood.

But you, father, decided to test us after all those centuries. You grasped through time and space and gave us back Mecca. And the faithful failed again, as it was a Kufr pirate that found it.

On the second raid, motivated by the sin of greed, we finally found it. We were shocked and in awe, but not worth of standing on this sacred Earth. I am not worth of a single ray of light from the Kaaba reaching my eyes. We fought to defend your city with our lives, in hope to do good for at least some the sins we are responsible for.

Father, a great poet of this world wrote a humble and true prayer I will recite, as I couldn't hope to express this better.

For all we ought to have thought, but have not thought.
For all we ought to have said but have not said.
For all we ought to have done but have not done.
I pray thee, God, for forgiveness. I pray thee, God, for another chance to prove we're worth your gift."

He bowed, raised and said to the camera "God hid the people of Motherlode far out in the periphery. I helped them to conquer Port Krin on Antallos. It will be there we meet and wait for the hajj. It will be from there we defend the holiest planet of all. Every single warrior is needed to defend it. We lost Mecca once, we won't lose it twice. Allahu akbar!"

"Allahu akbar" the shocked and overawed crew responded.

"Now, we can go earn money out in the sphere. Or we can go defend Mecca."
No one wanted to go for the money and so they jumped.

"Captain?!" a surprised voice came through the intercom "You'll want to see this!" With those words, the holographic projection changed and showed the standard jump point. There was an actual little traffic jam.

"What the..."

"I'm counting one Star lord, one Merchant and three invader class jumpships with a full drop ship complement each. Including our Invader, that's 20 dropships! One Condor, one Triumph, three Unions, two Intruders, two Leopards, two Mules, four Buccaneers and even two Monarch class! What the... incoming comm signal, routing through."

"This is Captain Chalid of the Sheik. New Invader class, please identify yourself."

"This is Captain Al'Heran of the Scimitar, merc complement inbound to Antallos looking for work."

"So you got the news, too? Welcome to the fleet, then! Allahu akbar."

"Allahu akbar."

"Group one will jump tomorrow, group two needs another two days to recharge the KF drive. I'm pretty sure there will be a group three that'll include you."

March 1 2007/3022

Zenith Point, Antallos System

At first, there was nothing. The last jumpship to the Inner Sphere had left Antallos hours ago.

All of a sudden, ships appeared. Space itself cried in protest as they had to right to exist, but a few minutes later two jumpships left the actual standard point, flying a few hundred kilometers away to make room for their followers. Antennae were directed at Antallos and the captain of the mighty Star Lord class Sheik opened a com channel.

March 1, 2007/3022

Antallos System

Antallos high orbit

ASTRO-E2 "Suzaku" had been designated for a start in July 2005, but the pirate raid changed all that. The Japanese satellites main instrument, a high spectroscopic resolution together with a very wide energy band, ranging from soft X-rays up to gamma-rays, had been designed to physically investigate high energy astronomical phenomena, such as black holes and supernovae.

After the initial raid, JAXA had bought a high speed photometer like that on Hubble and wanted to deploy it later, but the CSN stepped in and bought it.

Today, it was orbiting Antallos and watched the standard points as part of the traffic control system. His fine instruments detected two new all-spectrum sources appearing at zenith point and his antenna sent a priority signal to the system traffic control while the camera fetched better information about the visitors.

March 1 2007/3022

GDI Headquarters, Antallos Traffic Control

Port Krin, Antallos

It was an easy shift as no one expected jump ship traffic except the occasional independent trader.

Private Ford and his colleague Marc Smith, a reservist that had worked as a control tower operator on Earth, were playing a game of cards as an acoustic signal informed them about activity at the standard points.

They turned towards their consoles, looked at the screens and cursed. "I'm counting two ships. One Invader and a ... holy shit! The warbook ID's it as a *Star Lord*!"

Smith hit a button and klaxons sounded all over the headquarters, while Ford grabbed a phone dialing a number he was instructed to only use in emergencies.

"This is Ford, Traffic Control. Give me the General! Two jumpships

incoming, including a Star Lord! Invasion highly probable!"

"We'll inform him, but we need more details."

"Two jumpships at zenith point. One Star Lord and one Invader. We haven't identified the dropships yet, but each seems to carry a full complement. That's nine dropships right there!"

It took Davis a few minutes they used for further identifying the ships to answer the call.

"Davis here. Status?"

"Two jump ships at zenith point, one Star Lor... sir, incoming communication. Smith is putting it on speaker."

"Antallos control, this is Captain Mullah Chalid of the Azami Brotherhood Star Lord 'Sheik'. We want to speak to Mullah Al Azim."

A few minutes later

Aladdin stepped in front of the screen. "I'm here, Mullah Chalid."

The older warrior priest looked at him sharply. "You did send an interesting Message... hajji. Grand Ayatollah Azir sent us to bring him proof of the truth of your claims.... or execute you for blasphemy."

"The accusation of blasphemy hurts my heart, but I can see where it comes from as I doubted the first reports of Mecca coming back myself. Still, you need a Star Lord and an invader for that?"

Chalid snorted. "Not all warriors are that skeptic. Our companion in this wave is here to apply for your GDI forces to defend as mujahedeen."

"This wave?"

"We left another two invaders behind, to guard all of the civilians and recharge their KF drives. If we don't jump back next week to tell them everything's fine, they'll think it's a trap and stay clear."

"Civilians?"

"Pilgrims from the home worlds. Refugees from the combine and everywhere in the sphere we picked up on our way. Expect thousands, if not tens of thousands of them heading to your little world here, even if waves two and three think it's a trap. Your message hit the faithful like nothing before or since. Group two needs two more days to recharge their KF drives, group three up to a full week."

Aladdin winced. General Davis would kill him slowly. With a spoon. A blunt one.

"You spoke of Port Krin being liberated."

"Yes."

"What about the other cities? Do they already belong to your CSN?"

"No, but eventually they will."

Chalid snorted "Think they will have much time to decide? You have several groups of trigger happy mercenaries on Jihad inbound... My troops will visit your city and spend some time and money there to take a break. But I have no power about the others."

"Thank you for the warning, Mullah. I will meet you at the spaceport."

**Lockheed Martin UK, Manning House
London, United Kingdom
Earth, Grantville Cluster
14th May 2007/3022**

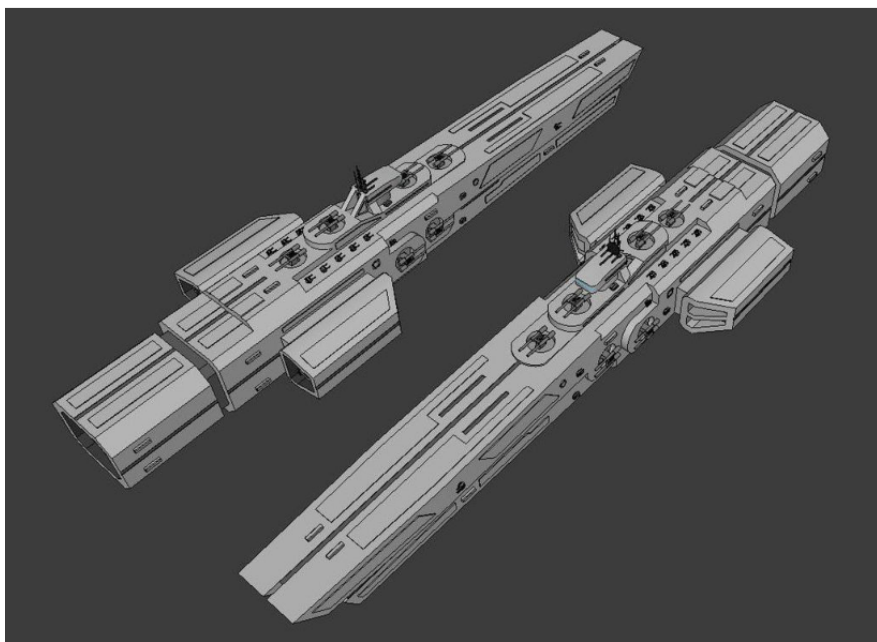
The thoroughly messy and crowded conference room was near pitch dark, the only illumination in the room coming from the large screen which reflected onto the faces of the assembled engineers and scientists in the room, leaving only part of their profiles visible to each other. It provided a blanket of anonymity and non-visibility for any grimace, wince or blush that could possibly show on their faces. It was this that convinced them that the Director was not a thoroughly heartless taskmaster when he was delivering his judgements on their designs.

Skip Tyler was leaning back on his chair, his one good leg comfortably resting on another in front of him. "Okay, let's see what Monitor designs you have for me today."

The digital projector flashed and there was a brief nervous silence.



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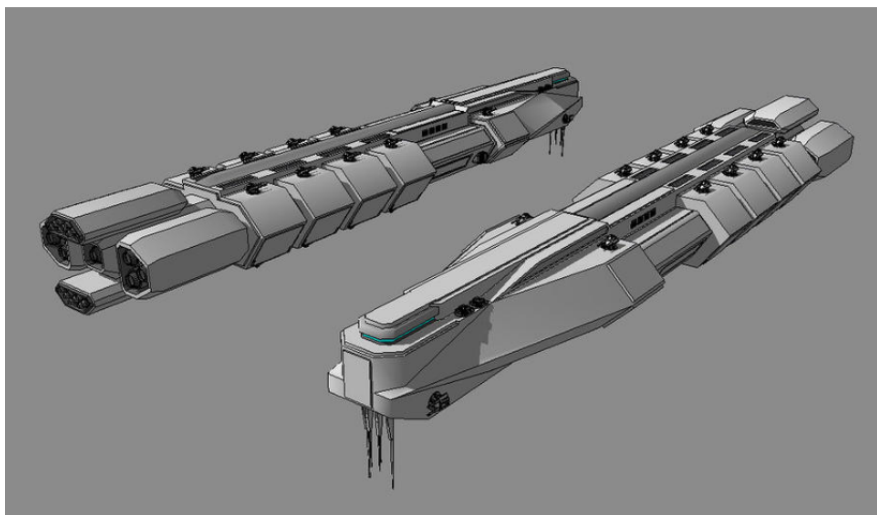


"Crap, the firing arcs for the turrets are lousy, not to mention there aren't enough of them. No engines in nacelles!"

The next slide was projected.



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"Better, but not there yet...this is a ship of war in space, no windows...not even one."

Another slide.

"Oh, ha ha, is this another joke, guys? Seriously, the *DS9 Defiant*?"

The pregnant silence in the room was deafening, and a number of the engineers looked to each other in the gloom, wondering which one of their number would dare do this again. They had vivid memories of Skip raking one engineer over the coals for boldly bringing forth a Federation *Constitution* Class Enterprise BT inspired redesign. The Nacelles had held the FusionT Engines, which connected to the secondary engineering hull; the neck however was modified to connect to the centre of the main saucer section, the entirety of which would spin for gravity and the decks properly modified to take advantage. The only reason Skip hadn't given the guy the boot was because of the sheer ingenuity the man had displayed in making an Enterprise that on paper at least would actually work...but it was totally impractical as a warship design that only relied on its armour for protection.

Skip opened his mouth to deliver another repetition of '*This is real life, not Star Trek*' when his eyes caught the specifics of this BT inspired USS Defiant. As a general hull shape it was not half bad, the sloping lines and armour of the one hundred and twenty meter craft made for quite impressive stats when attacked from front, aft, port and starboard, it was lousy from ventral and dorsal aspects though. Then again, most aerodyne ships suffered the same problem. Instead of the magic space warp port and starboard nacelles, they had been replaced with a good number of effective fore and aft facing missile cells. The FusionT engines took the place of the Impulse Drive emitters and instead of Pulse Phasers, four forward facing NL35s. The Quantum Torpedo launchers were also replaced with NAC20s. He felt truly sorry for any bastard who would be caught in this thing's forward weapon arc. The thing even had a small grav deck for the crew.

Skip coughed and shook his head. "Well, as a theoretical design I've got no complaints, it's only failing was the lack of turreted weaponry that fire into the dorsal and ventral arcs."

He thumbed the remote and another slide appeared.



[image]

"Hmmm, another good hull design, the fore missile tubes are a nice touch, but it needs more than one tri-barrel Capital Rail Cannon turret and it's lacking a nice heavy broadside armament to port and starboard."



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Skip whistled in appreciation. "Now this...*Infinity Class*?...is promising. It's mean and it's not something I'd want to try to take on, especially with those four forward facing N-Gauss Rifles, Brightstar NLs and the BrahMos Missile Launcher cells. Hundred and ten meters length. A nice void black coat of paint and radar absorbent stealth material and I can easily see this as being the first production

standard class of Monitor. It's certainly my new favourite."





Skip chuckled ruefully. "Jacques, if you want me to take your designs seriously I'd suggest you lay off putting the French flag on everything...and really a blue hull?" Everyone in the room joined in the laughter.

"Vive la France! Vive la Liberté!" came the tongue in cheek patriotic

rejoinder from Jacques Grenier; an engineer from the ESA.

"While I'll agree with the latter statement wholeheartedly," Skip smirked, "Jacques, you need more turrets, around the fore and mid quarters, again the window has to go. Another problem about the design is the way it narrows in the centre between the back half and the front half. That is a big problem as it means that it is a potential structural weak point in the armour and if targeted could break the ship's back. Don't get me wrong, it looks 'cool', but we're not going to impress our enemies with our hot rod space ships."

The slides changed again.

"Aha, into battlecarrier design we go..."

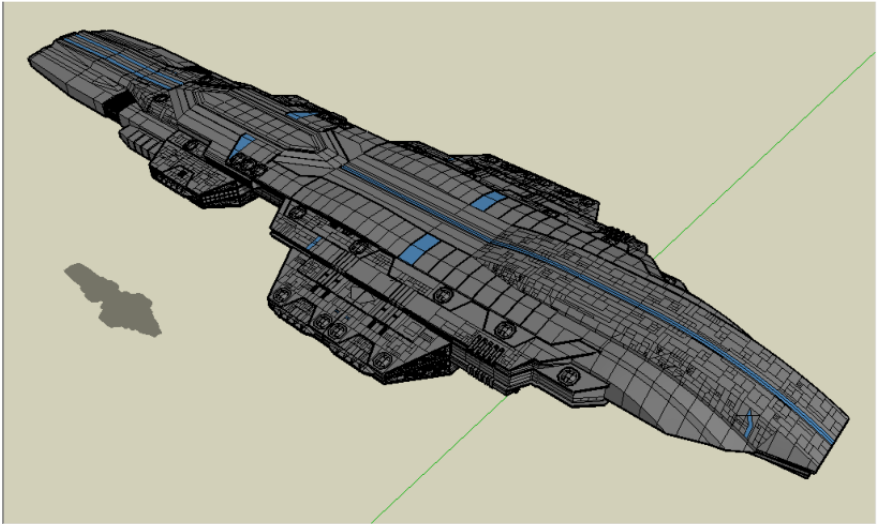


[image]

"*Three kilometres* in length! Goodness that's two Potemkin's end to end. No, we don't have the logistics to build this now...perhaps when we have the entire Grantville Cluster's resources behind us, we can crank out a dozen of these in time to say hello to the Clans. We'll file

this one in the 'To be deferred' folder."





"Nine launch bays for an ASF complement. Another 18 launch points dedicated for the release and recovery of KF Boom equipped ships. Two kilometres in length, much more reasonable, sixteen NL45s, eighteen HNPPC, sixteen Light-NGauss, deployable Brahmos missile launcher cells, thirty two AMS systems, LLs, Gauss Rifles and Thunderbolt20s, two ninety five meter grav decks. Top thrust of 4Gs

from two Potemkin class FusionTs...it even looks nice, sleek and deadly." Skip trailed off thoughtfully, staring at the design with an appreciative glint in his eyes. He stood somewhat awkwardly, and when he was sure of his balance walked over to the podium. The lights came back on forcing everyone in the room to shield their darkness adapted eyes.

"All right everyone it's getting there, I thought you should all be made aware that GDI planners have issued a revised timetable for Warship deployment. In the next four months I want you to focus on the Monitor, at the end of that time; we will be finalizing the basic production design. We will then head up to the Shipyards to begin construction of a single prototype and then space trials. Once they are over and everything checks out, an initial six ship production run will be completed. If no further problems from that run are identified then we'll crank up production in a way that would make Henry Ford green with envy...there's a lot of Solar System to defend and a lot of jobs that need doing in it."

"This Monitor Mark I will initially only operate in the Solar System, at least until we design and build a 'Carrier' Module for the Modular Jumpships that are on the drawing boards, which can carry them internally as cargo for deployment beyond Sol. In three years, Mk II model will be a redesign to include a KF Boom which will allow it to operate on any standard Jumpship design. Technically, that changes the Mk II into an Assault/Combat *Dropship*, but like the *Behemoth* Class of Dropship, it will never see the surface of a planet. Finally, we will use those lessons learned to begin construction of the first true Earth Warship. This ship will be filling the role of a Corvette, Frigate or Destroyer class, depending on short to mid-term needs. Personally, I think we'll end up going for a Frigate...only time will tell really. GDI wants the first one to be ready by 2013."

Everyone in the room knew the significance of that date. The CSN aimed to stay well away from taking sides in upcoming 4th Succession War, but was preparing for the worst case scenario. The Warship and Monitors at the right place, and the right time, could perhaps one day make all the difference in the world...

"What about the Battlecarrier?" Jacques Grenier frowned.

"One step at a time gentlemen, one has to learn to walk before you can run. Once our smaller warship is in the field we take another step up the ladder to an Armoured Cruiser Class, and then finally to the first Battlecarrier by 2027. By the time 2034 rolls around GDI wants to be ready to throw the Clans a nice, warm, welcome back to the Inner Sphere party."

888888888888888888

The following segment was written by Knobby

[Click to expand...](#)

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888888888888888888

**Lockheed Martin UK, Manning House
London, United Kingdom
Earth, Grantville Cluster
14th May 2007/3022**

After everyone had departed from the Warship meeting, Skip Tyler reached under the podium he was using, and dug out a copy of one of the source books covering submarines in the BT universe, the 3026 Technical Readout. He didn't regret in the least his decision to pass on a shot at a 688 command slot, back during the Red October incident, but at heart he was still a submariner. Fortunately, it was looking like there were enough forward thinkers in high places to keep it alive in planners' minds, even if it was only a 'back burner' project.

"Let's see," he mumbled to himself as he flipped open the book, and found the appropriate page for the Neptune class, produced by Federated Suns and later Federated Commonwealth. His eyes were first drawn to the image, after removing a sticky note reading 'see also TRO 3039', placed there by the friend who'd loaned him the book, earlier that day. Seeing nothing blatantly wrong with the depiction other than the silly retractable laser in the bow, from the limited view of the book, he started reading through the 'fluff', as he'd learned the BT gamers referred to it.

The first thing that caught his attention was the description of using extremely low frequency transmissions to coordinate from underwater control centers, and that attention wasn't to the benefit of the writer of the paragraph. The very nature of ELF transmissions precluded any reasonable transmission speed, at least using earth technology, with pre-arranged three letter codes standing in for specific command phrases. At least for fast attack subs, it was only really used to signal for them to come up to periscope depth to receive transmissions through other, faster communications methods.

Continuing on, he thought to himself, resuming his reading from where he left off. He felt an eyebrow involuntarily rise at the displacement. *One hundred tons!? That was only slightly more displacement than the very first US Navy submarine, the Holland, and that boat couldn't even crack ten knots with the help of wind and tide, or go deeper than the depth of an Olympic sized pool! And weapons? Forget it, outside of personal sidearms for crew members there simply wasn't enough room. You'd need to make the Neptune a magnitude of order larger to make a lick of sense as a combat vessel.*

Setting aside the incredulity that arose from reading that text, he continued on to the propulsion description. Diesel with hydrogen peroxide for AIP travel. Not even the German's Type 212 used that kind of propulsion setup, instead mounting a fuel cell for non-diesel operations... on a boat that was over ten times as heavy as the Neptune. "They apparently had a need for more stringent drug testing at FASA at the time," he grouched in disgust. The Navy's hatred of drug users dated back to just after Vietnam, reinforced for Tyler by the drunk driver who'd cost the command candidate his leg.

With a growing sense of something almost like dread, he read further. Test depth of 120 meters? For that size hull, not really unreasonable. About half the depth of a 688's officially claimed test depth, but between BT metallurgy and that tiny hull, not too unrealistic.

Thank goodness they at least understood the concept of passive sonar at FASA was the extent of his comments on the weapons computers, knowing that mediocre performance was almost a given, from what he'd been told by BT grognards.

Then he saw what had to be the topping of a cake seemingly made of stupidity combined with a lack of research. *LRMs used as torpedoes? What part of 'water is far more dense than air or vacuum' did the writers fail to understand? And an LRM-20 combined with two SRM-6s? Hyperspace ammo bins or not, that's insane for that size hull. With those weapons and that hull size you couldn't fit six fingers in the crew compartment, let alone six men. And there's that damned laser again.* "Submarines have no business directly engaging ground targets like that," he protested to an empty room. He cut off an intended objection about the laser being able to shoot underwater when he realized he had spoken his disbelief about the large laser in the Neptune's bow more loudly than was appropriate for his current location.

Let's see if Catalyst did any better for the reasoning, he said as he switched to the 3039 book, and flipped to the Neptune's listing.

The modified text regarding control communication methods, for those undersea command centers, helped ease Skip's blood pressure back down to safer levels, with the mention of using buoys and hard lines, but only by a little. *The buoys would help localize the command center, telling them where to look.* He did, however, have to grant the writers their assumption that it still was more protected, even without anything nearby to defend it, than a similar facility on land, where it could be directly targeted by aerospace fighters or dropships.

Unfortunately for him, Tyler's blood pressure was destined to begin rising again. *Same top speed, but now a 270 class ICE instead of a 240? They didn't have room for the original, its fuel, and its oxidizer, but then went and put a bigger powerplant in it. And no comment on the hydrogen peroxide system degrading the powerplant over time?* He knew, from chats with others involved in AIP methods involving hydrogen peroxide, that the stuff was more dangerous than the diluted stuff they sell at the drug store - *or chemist, as they call them here,* he adds absently. Being born and raised in the US, he was still adjusting to life in the UK, even after all the time he'd spent in England. *And...a thousand meter depth from that overglorified beer can?! The flipping "Alfa" class* - referring to the NATO code name for a titanium hulled

Russian attack sub class, *the deepest diving combat submarine Earth currently had - only goes down to 350 meters, and it's like 600 times as much displacement as this abomination!*

He closed the book, not even continuing to read, and put it back under the podium.

"I need a freaking drink," he declared to the world, or at least the part of it inside the room, and then proceeded to head somewhere that he could get just that.

**Office of Captain Samantha Swift
GDI Compound, Port Krin, Antallos
12 February 3022**

Having been summoned, Richter entered into the Intelligence office. Noting that the Captain was still going over something on her laptop, he sat down in the chair and waited in silence for her to finish.

A minute or so passed, and the GDI officer closed the lid on her computer to address the BMW executive. "Thank you for coming Richter. I do apologize for dragging you away from your work, but it was felt you needed to be brought up to speed on a certain subject."

Richter didn't let his discomfort show. He was far too professional to let it get to him. "How can I be of help?"

Swift reached into one of her drawers to remove a very thin folder and a couple books. Richter recognized source material when he saw it, and his inner alert was raised a degree. "Chandrasekhar Kurita."

"Yes? That is the name of the man who owns the parts we are installing in our factory."

Swift nodded. "He is a known figure from the Source Material and encountering him here has caused us to evaluate our policies for such occasions. Especially given how much we cannot totally trust the Material." Richter saw the logic in this, and agreed.

"I must say, Captain, that I did not pay much attention to the Material, even after the raid. It simply didn't appeal to me. What should I know about Chandy?" He reached out to take the file folder out from under the books, leaving them on the Captain's desk. Flipping it open, he found himself looking at a recent photo of the Combine merchantman as well as drawings of an older man. He could see the resemblance, and how one could age into the others.

"Chandrasekhar, after the Clan Invasion, worked as an unofficial spymaster for the Draconis Combine to combat the Word of Blake. However, the material indicates that he was active in using his

merchant monies and skills to try and improve the Combine in various ways. I suggest you read all this material as soon as you can. We are concerned that he is using his position here to gain intelligence on our operations."

"So?"

Richter's simple contrary statement caught Swift off guard, but she didn't let it flicker for more than a moment before clamping down on it. "He is still an operative for a foreign government and we must treat him as such."

"I must confess some confusion, Captain Swift. For you see, I am a businessman. Chandy is a businessman as well." Richter paused, looking at the file in his hand. "And all this information is at least 30 years before validity. Much can change before then. How can we ascribe such characteristics to the man who is here, now?"

Swift countered quickly. "We have discussed this already, Richter. One does not simply emerge as a private spymaster out of thin air. It takes many years to build up those resources. We cannot discount the possibility that he has already started, given that he was able to stymie the Word for many years."

"Then why not send a spy to deal with him?"

"Because we didn't know who he was until he got there. And by that time, he had already been ingrained into the Factory Project. We could not simply introduce an agent into that without tipping our hand. We are bringing this to you because we..." Swift stopped when Richter brought up his hand.

"I understand. Then I will be as I am. And treat him as he is. There is no need to force an issue that may not even be one. Good day." The German got up and left, leaving behind the books and files.

The Hague, Netherlands
Earth, Granville Cluster
22 February, 2007

Ambassador Ferri paced back and forth across the common room set aside for his entourage. As the lead representative from the Draconis Combine, his orders had come from the offices of the Coordinator himself.

In summation, he and his fellow lawyers, diplomats and guards were to find out as much as they could about the Capitol world of the CSN, and report back once on Antallos.

What they had found was simply astounding. They had approached the world from nearest lunar (unimaginatively named "The Moon") pirate point, and out the windows of the refitted Union, had seen a world bathed in the lights of cities. Any thoughts that Motherlode was another barbaric world was washed away in the intricate spiderwebs of light that covered continents. He recalled thinking at the time that the population calculated by Vorax of Port Krin was an underestimation. His more experienced eye felt that there were closer to Four Billion people, which made for a world that could match any major Inner Sphere world! Although (he was silently thankful) the Capital Worlds were still better off than that.

They had landed on a large island away from the major population centers, called "New Zealand". He had made a note to search for 'old' Zealand in the Sphere when they returned. Hopefully that information would help understand where the Motherlodgers came from, both in terms of society and physical origin in the Sphere. There, they had been greeted by the local delegation, and taken aboard a large plane, large enough to be a dropship - although limited by being an air breather.

The plane had flown halfway around the world towards the most densely populated continent they had seen. On the journey, they had been briefed about the legal situation as it currently stood. Like the Inner Sphere, Motherlode had different rules about the treatment and punishment of Pirates and actual armed combatants. The problems the Motherlodgers were facing was the blurred distinction between the two.

Vorax had invaded, yes. No one argued that. But he had hired, forced, or simply accepted pirates into his invasion force. Some, like

the Buron Cavalry, were legitimate mercenaries, forced to work under duress. But for a great many others, the issue was more clouded. Months had been spent in political and legal deadlock trying to figure out what the crimes exactly were, as well as dealing with the massive jurisdiction clusterfuck that arose from all the internal provincial divisions.

They were honestly hoping that the experiences of the Combine ambassadors would help. Until these issues could be sorted out though, the CSN had seen fit to place all their captives in a location removed from local civilization, but not completely isolated. The man who escorted them to the facility admitted that attempts at total isolation had proved unworkable, so there was limited contact with the outside.

For the past week, Ferri had helped sort through all the paperwork involved, surreptitiously taking notes while his people interviewed many of the still-captive invaders. Amazingly, they had found an ISF agent who had been swept up in the Invasion, and that person had been tagged for further interviews for information that they had acquired in the time they had spent on Motherlode.

It took less than three days for his first panic attack.

The news came when one of the junior lawyers had crashed into the meeting he was attending, one that was trying to sort out the technical differences between the actual pirates (of which he found reasons to place as few Combine people in as possible) and mercenaries or legitimate military units in the service of Vorax (of which he maximized Combine presence).

The poor young woman, rushing from the interview chambers, had burst into the room - forgetting all sense of decorum and proper civility to simply yell out "THEY USED NUKES!"

A few moments confusion, and Ferri soon demanded an explanation. On the side of the Motherloders, they had simply contacted their superiors, and received permission to explain truthfully.

Yes, they had nuclear weapons. They had emptied their major

stockpiles, and put them into orbit to soften up the invasion to prevent the ground war from being too costly. What horrified the Ambassador was the simple acceptance of the use of weapons banned by the Ares Convention in the defense of their world. They did not like what they had done, but had to do it to defend themselves.

The Coordinator had to be made aware of this fact, and Ferri put it at the top of the list of things to say when they returned to Antallos.

When pressed about how many more nuclear weapons they had left over, the Motherloaders wouldn't answer.

Boeing/BMW Mech Factory Site
Port Krin, Antallos
23 February 3022

Richter and Chandrasekhar Kurita shared a certain passion for their work, quickly developing a well-oiled professional relationship over the past couple weeks since their introduction. At the moment, they were taking a break from the drudgery of paperwork and inspections to take a late lunch in the cafeteria.

"How's your salad, Chandy?" Richter had stumbled over the full name of his Kuritan counterpart for the first few days until the bemused merchant had given him permission to use the shorthand for his name.

"Not bad. Little bland for my taste." Chandy poked at the leafy greens, missing the more opulent meals that he would have been served back at home.

"Company policy, I'm afraid." the German smiled on the inside at the idea of helping the other man shed a few unnecessary pounds. It would certainly do him good in the long run, as his own wife had drilled all those good eating habits into him over the past 15 years.

"Speaking of companies, how goes the talks with Federated Boeing?" Chandy mentioned the recently begun negotiations between the company from the lost Hegemony colony and the similarly named producer of Dropships in the Federated Suns.

"I have not heard much on that, as I'm not in a position to be privy to those negotiations." Richter sidestepped the question, being from the BMW side of the partnership.

Chandrasekhar nodded, then switched tracks. "I have been wondering though, what sort of economy does your world run?"

Richter paused as he tried to frame his response. That was a difficult question, given the gamut of historical economic plans. There was also the inherent assumption on the part of the Combine merchant that Earth was a unified world made things even trickier. "We have tried everything from barter to unrestricted free market over the course of our history, by differing sizes of groups." A truthful answer, but not really answering anything. "I suppose you could best describe our current economic situation as a Free Market economy with certain government imposed restrictions."

"Interesting." Chandy mulled this over. "I have seen many different means of exchange in my years." Not a total exaggeration for the near 30 year old man. He didn't like being so blunt in his questions, but had found the man across from him was far more receptive to direct and pragmatic queries, rather than the more subtle machinations that he was used to in the courts of his home nation. "Although I would have thought that your world would have stuck with a specific economic type."

"Ah, yes. That is something of a sticky question to answer." Richter appeared lost in thought. "You see, after the war, we had to rebuild our economy. So, we tried a model that encouraged cooperation at all levels of production, but some feel that it is now too restrictive."

The German paused again to consider how to proceed, but in that moment, Chandy had instantly leapt upon the mention of a 'war'. Did this mean that the CSN was not a unified people? That the people of Motherlode had fought a war against other worlds under the same umbrella?

So many possible questions were interrupted when a young page rushed up to Richter, and leaned into one ear to whisper something.

A scowl crossed his face, and Richter stood up, leaving his food behind. "We have a problem."

* * *

Richter had hurried through the procedures to enter the clean-room while Chandy had problems fitting his girth into the static-free smock. Eventually he managed and caught up to Richter, who was talking with a pair of people over a piece of equipment he didn't recognize.

To Chandrasekhar, *this* spoke more of the CSN than any vague mention of war or of their military capacity. This room was gleaming white, and the faint smell of disinfectant in the air. The Motherloders went through so much trouble and effort to keep this room clean, where they used special equipment imported from their homeworld to examine the machinery that would be installed into the factory. And check they did. Nothing was taken for granted and his initial impatience at the CSN for not simply putting everything back together and building mech frames had slowly given way to an appreciation for the thoroughness in which Richter and his company worked.

When he first asked about the effort going into checking everything, Richter had responded that given that the old factory had problems producing proper equipment, they wanted to see if it was a people-error or a machine-error. And also to check for damage caused in transit due to mistakes.

Chandy was insulted at the thought, but a second look at the face of the man who was operating the factory on behalf of the Combine showed that no insult was intended. To Richter, it was simply standard business practices on Motherlode ... to check and re-check everything for any possible problem. An attitude inconceivable to the people of the Combine, matters of Honor giving a sense of accepting what is before the person. Not so the Motherloders.

Richter growled something incomprehensible, but the tone was universal. He stalked over to a phone set into the wall and picked up the receiver, punching in numbers with unnecessary force. Chandy

took the distraction to approach the two men who worked in the room to inquire as to the problem.

"It's the myomer extruder, sir." The lead technician, covered to reveal no distinguishing features replied. "The casing was pried open, and when we checked inside, we found some parts damaged."

Chandy paused to process this. He had thought that the people who worked here simply checked everything from the outside. This was.... He wasn't sure how to reply to this information, and this pause allowed the engineer to assume that the silence meant to continue.

"We thought that maybe it was an accident, but further inspection revealed tooling marks on the damaged part. If we tried using it as is, the myomer wouldn't set properly, we think, and it would snap pretty quickly. We called it in and..."

Chandy tuned out the report of the worker. Only one thought now crossed his mind and he knew the same thought was in Richter's head as well. Sabotage.

But by who?

27 February 3022
GDI Headquarters, Port Krin
Antallos

"Nothing?" General Davis was present because of the potential severity of the sabotage. Not from a mechanical point of view, the engineers had already repaired the damage, and were keeping an eye on that part in case of further problems. No, the issue was more one of who, and the why.

"No sir. We got the fingerprints alright. Full prints, clear as day. The ring, middle and index on the left hand. We've already put them into the system for future checking. Problem is, we have no one to compare it too. None of our people touched it, and we checked them anyways." Captain Swift did not like losing, and here she was, clearly doing so against the unknown party responsible for the damage.

"What about the Combine people?" Davis offered up the question, knowing that Swift would come to that point eventually. He just wanted to know sooner.

"That's a more difficult proposition." Ambassador Smith replied. "We cannot simply demand that they submit themselves to our analysis. And as per your instructions, we have informed Tai-sa Kurita of the problem, although it would appear as though Chandrasekhar had also done the same." He put one hand on his forehead, rubbing his temples in response to the headache.

"Putting that aside from the moment, I want to give a rundown on the likely suspect organizations." Swift tapped a key on the laptop in front of her, and read off some of the displayed data. "First is the Ministry of Information Intelligence and Operations. MIIO, being the Davion government secret service, would have reason to sabotage any attempt by the Combine to expand their military base. Same would go for the Department of Military Intelligence. Of course, the Kuritas have pointed the finger at them quite profusely."

"And how did the FedSuns Ambassador respond?" Davis wondered aloud, although he could take a wild guess, and be fairly accurate.

Charles shook his head. "Pointing right back at the Kuritan Internal Security Force."

Swift nodded in agreement. "Plenty of internal factions who would not want to see someone else get their hands on Combine materials, even going behind Coordinator Kurita's back. Could be points of honor, where we are doing something they could not, or simple avarice. Still legitimate concerns there."

Another tap, and another file appeared for review. "We are also looking at the Outworlds Alliance. Their intelligence service is tied into their military arm and they could try something to prevent an unknown power from arising against their side and rear."

Davis nodded. "And still, the most obvious culprit..." he let his phrase trail off.

"Yes sir. ComStar and ROM. Given their established MO they are most likely to have had an agent in position to cause the damage and could extract their agent without reprisal." Swift's desire to invoke a reprisal on the controllers of the HPG network was palpable.

"And yet, without evidence, we can't exactly go about making accusations." Smith was quick to point out. "Not to anyone. And even if we did point at ROM, how would we explain how we know about them? It's not like they are public knowledge."

An uncomfortable silence marked that statement as the three people in the room eventually gave in, and marked up the first blow to ComStar, even if they didn't know that war was declared.

02 March 3022

Port Krin, Antallos

The ROM agent returned to the shipping container/apartment that had been arranged as a safe house. The satisfaction of a job well done was tempered by the ever-present worry that an error had been made, that there was some evidence to lead the latest Scavenger State on the field of the Inner Sphere to come for ComStar. Now came the hard part - waiting for the arrival of a proper field office to arrive with the jumpship sent to upgrade the HPG station.

That was a small problem, as Antallos didn't need a proper ROM section before the Invasion. Afterward, the usual bungling of those not seeing the needs of Blake had slowed down the deployment, until the Primus, in his wisdom, had ordered the upgrade.

But for the past month, the agent had seen nothing. Not even that this 'CSN' was even aware of the sabotage done.

That meant a job well done.

29 August 3022

Port Krin Mech Factory

Port Krin, Antallos

There wasn't much ceremony. While it had taken a couple months to

put everything together, and then another couple to produce the Prototype, so much was riding on this one vehicle that no one dared breathe a word of hope.

Tai-sa Kurita was escorted up to the top of the 'mech. Gone was the usual adornment of his station, and in its place was one of the GDI plugsuits with his own armored coat over it. He still wasn't used to the tightness involved, but had seen the advantages of the cooling bodysuit. His granddaughter and Shanti Taro had petitioned for the purchase of a few hundred of them, but that was held up by political wrangling. A report he had read indicated that the CSN had some isolationist hardliners of varying degrees, who worked against any attempt to exploit Motherlode Lostech for potential advantage.

Clearing his head of those particular thoughts, he climbed into the cockpit of the stripped-down Jenner with a spryness that belied his age. Engineers on the outside performed final checks while he made sure all the controls were as he remembered.

The Jenner had no armor, no weapons. Her fusion engine was too small, salvaged over a year ago and donated by the GDI to the Factory for testing of the mechs. Ulysses signaled that he was ready, and received external confirmation. He closed the cockpit, taking in the enjoyable sense of *newness* that came from all around him. With a flick of a switch, he powered up the engine, watching the power ratings climb.

On the outside, the gantry that held the mech was pulled away, leaving the machine standing upright under her own power. A first success to cause Tai-sa Kurita to smile.

"You are clear to exit the hanger, Tai-sa." The voice came over the radio, built into the neurohelmet.

"Acknowledged. Jen-00X-1 moving out." The response using the technical designation of the CSN constructed mech brought back memories of his youth, and his first time piloting the family mech. They were good ones. Taking a deep breath, Ulysses gripped the controls tightly, and willed his machine forward.

The Jenner took one hesitant step as the gyro adapted to moving for the first time. The second step was far easier, and the third completely fluid. Staying at a walking pace, the mech left the building behind and into the open sunlight, where the polarizing glass darkened above him.

"We have confirmation of movement. No errors reported." The voice on the other end of the radio held a barely restrained glee. "How's the ride, Tai-sa?"

"Very good. Very good indeed."

Rev. Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach
Superior General
Curia Generalize
Compagnia di Gesu
C.P. 6139
00195 Roma Prati ITALY

Reverend Fr. General:

I write this eight months after setting foot on the soil of Antallos. Things have changed since my last letter. As before, the poor and the benighted condition grows beyond what we have been led to believe from the presumed 'sourcebooks'. Port Krin remains stable, prospering under their first true organized rule since the fall of the Star League. It has not changed that almost a quarter of a millennium of decay cannot be overturned in the toil of a few months, or indeed several decades.

How could they have fallen so far and so quickly? The rapid collapse of civilization and society is not unusual to history, and steadily I am led to believe that we, born of the twentieth century, live in the comfortable delusion of such an event never happening in our lifetime. We have been conditioned by the rapid rise of progress, in two hundred fifty years changing the shape of our world from a collection of contentious kingdoms to, though still contentious, more longer-viewed nations that have conquered the final frontier. Having known only steady improvement, how can we consider that the future would be anything but more of the same haphazard yet well-intention attempts at solving each problem as it arrives? Even our own Order tasks itself with educating and lifting the sad portions of our Earth left behind by the march of progress.

We have grown comfortable. We have assumed we have reached the extent of our obligations to God and mankind, and having learned all we can from the excesses of our predecessors. As I sit here within an old chapel that had been used as nothing more than a warehouse for the past hundred years, I can only give thanks to God that he has

granted us this most difficult and worthy toil.

The people of Antallos have not so much lost faith, as they have lost hope. It is with great reluctance that I say, not all of it can be blamed upon Comstar. They have presented themselves as the only way out of this almost literal hellhole, with the promises of technology, security, and most importantly offworld assignments. The Church(es) of the Inner Sphere have done nothing, ignoring the Periphery for the sake of their internal schism, and the last priest was murdered in a food riot some centuries ago. Those that still keep to the faith do so in small house shrines, often just a crucifix or an old weathered image of the Holy Mother and Child.

Antallos, due to its proximity to the Federated Suns, was settled primarily by Catholics. The people of Antallos are not agnostic, but apathetic. They have simply lost the will to -care- for anything other than their own survival. It is with some pleasure however than I can relate the Inner Sphere lacks most of what we consider as racism or inter-religious intolerance. The recent wave of Islamics in the Hadj has brought tension more in terms of food stocks and housing than in any doctrinal differences.

The main question of faith is that if God is good and just and merciful, then why did He allow the Star League to fall? Why did He condemn them all to centuries of misery and pain? It is likely the same question that the Romans asked of their pagan gods when their Empire fell to the marauders. What is God's plan?

Why do bad things happen to good people; the old and basic question. I could tell that no answer would convince or comfort them. I was greatly tempted to answer that -WE- are God's tools, that our miraculous appearance in this war-weary universe is the very answer to His mercy and wisdom. What better way of letting good flourish again that to let people DO good in as much they are able? Mankind to mankind, for the past millenia have only revealed the limits and flaws of self-centered human solutions. But that too, is hubris, as much as perhaps the Star League had neglected to notice their feet of clay.

It is not God that abandoned them. It was their Church, that pulled

inwards to look only at itself. It was Comstar, that robbed them of their faith, dangling false temporal expectations rather than true hope. Parading themselves as the last remnant of the Star League's culture and prosperity, but limiting those who can partake of these boons to those who would give up everything else in their lives, only grinds down the existence of those that remain. Comstar is not a religion, it is an elitist club.

I have included with this letter the book of Comstar, the Word of Blake, their supposed holy writ. It is with sadness that I must say, the sourcebooks so far have proven accurate in this matter. The relevant passages mentioned in Sourcebook: Comstar, printed by FASA in 1992, are identical. I pray that, like certain other engineers when faced with what they call "FASA physics", you may resist the urge to bash your head into a wall many many times after reading the text. Unlike numbers intended as abstract representation or shortcuts for playing a scenario, historical events may yet be inexact but still build up to the same overall and apparent result. We may therefore assume that ROM exists.

Operation Holy Shroud, the systematic assassination of the scientists that could have delayed the decay from Star League's technological level, may also thus be presumed to have been carried out. The FASA books are not holy, this we all agreed upon, nor do they count as any evidence. However, from implications alone, it is already clear that Comstar is a cancer upon society. Even we must consider the irony, that despite our Church's perception in popular culture as opponents of science, we have guided and funded the advance of the arts and sciences until finally the world could proceed on its own momentum past the Renaissance. Jerome Blake used the very act of our Church safeguarding knowledge in the fall of the Roman Empire as the shield to prevent further harm from warring states.

Here the resemblance ends. Comstar is, though its size, a cult. Their revelations end with the resurgence of the Star League, a state of peace and progress that many of them do not truly remember or understand at all. It is tainted with nostalgia, in the same way that the innocence of the Victorian Age may seem like a golden time by contrast the crushing horror of the World Wars that came in the dawn of the 20th Century.

The Star League, even at its best, was no more than a reasonably functioning government system. Their mindset, the bliss of that era, by what I can glean from the historical records here in Antallos, is very much like our own cultural perspective. The seeds of the First World War were planted in the nationalistic mania and inequalities of the previous era. The Second World War was formed from the grudges of the First. Even should GDI somehow, by a variety of wildly improbable events or fantastic breakthroughs in technology, manage to dominate the Inner Sphere and bring about a renewed Star League, it would inevitably fall as its previous form. No mortal body, laid upon nothing more than self-interest, can endure through time. No rootless credo can unite a people through their boundaries of culture. The people of the Inner Sphere expect the Star League to solve all their problems, to return them to a state of grace that they had somehow lost by allowing Amaris the Usurper to kill the Camerons, to chop down the tree that brings forth knowledge and life. It is only paradise by what they have so lost from their destructive pride.

This is nothing more than an excuse, looking for solutions from the outside rather than change themselves for the better. If it is forced upon them, it would not truly be their responsibility, they would have cause to be resentful and maintain their sense of communal identity. In many ways, nothing more than the same old selfish desires; they do not want to have to -pay- for their own reconstruction.

Comstar's goal, to encourage the choleric Houses to batter themselves down to dull fragments barely worth calling civilization, is no salvation either. Jerome Blake did not have a plan. He had, at best, a pessimistic expectation. It was the only way out that he could see, for in his dying years he saw Comstar as a fading memory of the Star League. The Church endured the fall of Rome, the Church endured the condemnation of the Reformation, and only in the aftermath of the Star League's collapse did it finally seem to lose significance by consuming itself in the concerns of their localities.

In their (Salvation 4:18-24) there is indeed:

Terra's neutrality under our control guarantees that no

matter what the leaders of the Inner Sphere do, something of the Star League and mankind will survive. Once the Great Houses have beaten themselves senseless and bloody, we can emerge, offering a new chance to recover what they have tried so hard to destroy.

All that saved mankind during its last so-called Dark Age were the churches and religions. These were havens for humanity's learning and they stood alone as beacons in the darkness and foulness that humankind has become, to preserve the history and knowledge... If Comstar is to survive into the future, it must look to these religions as a blueprint for surviving the wars that are unfolding around us.

Here we can discern two things already. First, that being two thousand years removed from the fall of the Roman Empire and the darkness of the Middle Ages, which we as historians know were not quite so 'dark', since Constantinople endured as the Roman Empire for so long, Blake continues a literary illusion. This is understandable to some extent, since he mentions "the religions" when it is in fact only our Church that held together the fractured elements of the Roman Empire and in our cloisters and in our monasteries illuminated the era. Though the fall of Constantinople to the Persians is a most regrettable event, we do not neglect the contributions of the Islamic scholars to the field of arts and sciences, specially mathematics. The 'Dark Age' only seemed so in contrast to the wealth and expanse of the Roman Empire, and even I as a Castilian must say that Europe is not all of the world. It was Timur Leng, who in crushing the Persian Empire, destroyed much of their famed universities and knowledge. Though a Moslem, he was as cruel to his co-religious subjects as to those of different faiths; a conqueror who did not expect his empire to survive his death.

It was at this similar time that we have begun see fruit in the encouragement of learned discourse and the rediscovery and application of Classical manuscripts. In 1400 in the twilight of the Persians so begun our Renaissance. I apologize for repeating knowledge that you already know, but it is to illustrate that Blake had a perfectly understandable and human tendency towards either incomplete knowledge or broad generalizations.

Second, as taken from the first paragraph, that Comstar's recovery is modeled upon the Renaissance. At worst, it would be like our Missions of today, helping ruined or restricted societies rebuild themselves.

Toyama's interpretations of Blake's personal comments is execrable. It should be clear enough that Blake desired to avoid Comstar's being chopped up and used by the Houses as nothing more than instruments of their self-destruction. A waste of human lives; it is to my understanding that with Kerensky having left the Inner Sphere to its own devices, there was nothing anyone could do to try and stop the Houses from tearing each other and the Star League's hard-won advances to unrecognizable shreds. Someone had to maintain decency and self-control. It might as well be Comstar. I cannot fault Jerome Blake in this. Please have a mass for his soul, for his writings only give hints of a poor soul searching for the religious experience, looking for God as comfort and guide, yet held back until the end by his own bitter reliance on practical human logic. He may not have had faith, but he hoped, very much, and Comstar as it stands now would likely be very, very much a disappointment.

Toyama's interpretation, word-for-word, is the same as that in the Sourcebook.

* In this one passage, Blake has laid the foundation for the mission of Comstar, to thrive and to survive to re-light the lamp of civilization for mankind. Blake also foresees that by creating an oligarchy as the basis for Comstar, the organization's survival is guaranteed in the wars of succession that the House Lords currently wage. Only by patterning ourselves after those religions that survived in the past will Comstar live on in the future.

It was not by our 'pattern' of religion that our Church survives, does continue to have significance, and will surely stand in the future. It is because of Faith in God and the potential for good that lies within mankind. This is nothing more than wretched self-indulgence, profiting off the pain of others, a sickening theft of the soul's repose. This is more than just blasphemy- it is a monstrous crime. It is as a

child, letting brothers get into trouble just to reap the rewards of being the good boy in comparison- a credo of opportunism, rather than forgiveness; a belief of eventual rule, rather than present service; this is not faith. This is not God's will. In as much as Augustine states that God allowed evil to exist that greater good may be done, but to do evil with intent is not the work of a good religion. The question of purpose and free will does not even enter into this right here, just greed, ego, and avarice. It is by their works, that they be judged.

I am getting angry, even as I write this. But we must not hate Comstar, for not all of its people are such... dangerous fools. It is plain that while the religious trappings dominate, there is a distinct secular branch of their organization. It is obvious, for they do need to maintain their HPGs and equipment, even if clad in strange rituals. There are those who truly believe in the mission of bringing light of reason and progress back into the Inner Sphere, that Comstar is only its most fragile vessel. Our Lord has said, "*Love thy enemy.*", for it is not just by defeat that one may remove enemies from the path, but also by turning them into allies.

With this in mind, there other other points of interest here in Antallos. Father Seto and I, alongside Reverend Jones and Rabbi Bergman, have begun to set up charity missions and primary schools. There have been some mostly-civil discussions with GDI's supporting Social Welfare elements regarding secular education and the separation between religion and state, but we have all agreed that being 'the government', or 'the man', GDI's personnel in positions of authority make people uneasy when they act too nice and obliging.

Centuries of oppression make them wary when those in power share that power; it is the concept the Japanese identify as 'giri', and others as handing out 'favors'. Clearly GDI expects something in return, and at the very least mute or non-confrontational obedience. This is somewhat counterproductive to all our aims on the society, since those who are speaking up are either doing so in wary criticism or trying to set up a new oligarchy to replace the one GDI just dismantled.

The poor, as ever, remain silent and wishing they could just go back

to being invisible, living through the cracks in the social structure. Men and women of the cloth may move more freely; it has been a long time, but even from observations of Comstar they know that it is part of a religious person's responsibility to try, even if in futility, to dole out charity to the less fortunate. It is like 'buying karma', a cynical and simplistic but not altogether unrealistic perspective. We listen.

They do not expect us to do any permanent change, but it is enough that finally after such a long, long time -someone- even bothers to just stand there and let them pour out their sufferings and longings and all sadness of the human experience. The children are specially woeful in this, for our sentiment of children is that they would rather go out and play rather than stay indoors and learn. Here, they do not want to leave. The school is security, food, shelter, away from the bleak subsistence of their family lives. There is no play; anyone old enough to work or steal must do so.

Naturally, Comstar knows how useful this is for espionage purposes. I have noticed several suspicious characters loitering around the construction sites of the new Port Krin Parish of St. John the Baptist and the primary to secondary schoolhouses. There are some interesting hints that they might not be as they appear, instead of Comstar spies actually eyes of certain other groups all-too-familiar to our Order.

....

Maximo R. Iglesias
Port Krin, Antallos

Vatican Archives

hajj II

Office General Davis

GDI Headquarters, Port Krin, Antallos

March 1, 2007

Aladdin Al Azim sat in his superior's office and was stared down by General Davis. After a moment Davis exclaimed "What were you thinking, Colonel? We have a Starlord and an invader in System, carrying...", he pointed to a sheet of paper, "three intruders, three Unions, one leopard, one triumph and a condor, out to kill you or invade. And let's not forget about this talk of tens of thousands of civilians!"

In the streets, the GDI Expeditionary Force was preparing to defend the city. No one knew what the newcomers would accept as proof of Meccas existence and everyone wanted to be prepared if this sizable army decided to attack. The reporters were everywhere, busy filming and gathering information. Especially annoying was Lois Lane, a person anyone in GDI had learned to both respect and despise for her talent to be at the right – or wrong, depending on which side of a secret you were – place at the right time.

"Sir, if we deny the pilgrims Access to Mecca, we aren't much better than Amaris. Plus, we need their Mechs to defend us and their jumpships to improve transport.

On top of that, the GDI as well as Saudi intelligence services checked the message before I sent it. It does not give away too much. I also got an invitation from King Ali of Saudi Arabia to whomever needs proof of the city. It's for up to ten people, no dropships. The cause of the hajj is supported by every single Muslim member nation as well as the Vatican and Israel." Aladdin al Azim said, knowing that the Knesset had debated a long time about this, but lastly they supported the cause. It was a large step towards winning the hearts of the Muslim community.

Aladdin was still astounded about this community. Even knowing it was Earth could not transport the diversity of the community good enough. Religious traditions separated by countless light years in the sphere were crammed together on the same planet, much less les

than 10% of its surface. It was unimaginable to him, and he had learned a lot from it.

There were conflicts, lots of it, even downright wars. He knew about conflicts between the faithful, but he had also learned a reason for the hajj: tolerance. A temporary peace for everyone coming there, millions of people meeting in Mecca at the same time. It was difficult not to learn respect for your brothers in faith there. It was just a natural reaction to fear importing more hate, violence and extremism from the sphere.

Davis shook his head nearly unnoticeable. That was a powerful block and opposing this invitation would be considered an insult, making his work a lot more difficult. He was no man to acquire avoidable difficulties and the Combine already sent ambassadors to Earth. "No more than ten, then. Still, tens of thousands..."

"We have to expect thousands of pilgrims annually, Sir." Al Azim commented "While this is negligible for the hajj itself, it might be a strain for counterintelligence."

"Yes. It isn't as if we could use normal airport customs for those pilgrims..." the General responded "Not to mention the mercenaries on Antallos itself. Luckily, there are already requests to rotate those pilgrims in groups of less than hundreds. While we know about the fix date of the hajj, there's already an ongoing debate about this in the relevant authorities."

"Yes, I talked to a lot of scholars, religious judges and other religious authorities before leaving Earth, Sir. Some of my men left behind are still talking about religious doctrine and changes in Islam over the centuries. Send a request and Earth will send you a ship of priests, judges and scholars of the faith that served in national militaries to hold them at bay and learned about Inner Sphere Islam and the faithful in the Sphere from my men. The Ummah on Earth has prepared itself for this moment. I have seen the Kaaba and I will not accept some of the behavior of my brethren that have not touched Earth even here. While I have come to the conclusion that both earthly and spheroid Islam can learn from each other, people in the Sphere mainly went wrong centuries ago. I swear by God we will keep the mercenaries in the hajj fleet civilized and sporting behavior

fitting to the faithful. They are visiting Earth, Earth will be making the rules and me and my men will be happy to enforce them."

Of course, Earth Islam had its own problems with Islamic extremists, Afghanistan and the Iranian biochemical attacks before the new revolution pre-contact.

"That does sound helpful indeed. At least those mercenaries in the arriving fleet do not travel aboard the GDI command circuit." Davis sighed "Mullah Chalid warned us about them being aggressive. I think we could actually use them. Of course, they need lots of training even after we put them on retainer. We will have to prepare a new unit for the legion. If we can even trust them enough to include them in the legion this early, even if your religious support might be able to deal with this aspect. The earliest step could be to use them for retaliation against the cities that attacked us after Vorax' fall. So, what did our guests bring with them?"

"Mullah Chalid informed me about the troops in this wave. He has two companies built from two assault, ten heavy, ten medium and two light mechs plus a full infantry battalion and two companies with 28 light vehicles, a full battalion of heavy vehicles, mostly tanks and artillery, supported by eight ASFs, another 111 infantry and two Mark VII small craft. It's a small army and perfectly capable of landing in contested territory. Chalid even has the advantage of high standardization by Inner Sphere standards. He could give us a very hard time should he chose not accept the truth, which is less than improbable. The second mercenary is equipped much worse. He has an understrength company with seven medium and three heavy mechs, three infantry platoons and two ASF lances. That said, he has also only three different light and two different heavy mech designs plus three ASF designs. While he would be beatable without spending too much ammunition, the city states that attacked us, possibly excluding Proctor, would have a hard time against him. They left two mercenary invaders a single jump behind, one of them holding two leopards and an union with an ASF lance and an understrength company of two light, four medium and four heavy mechs, the other supporting two unions and a leopard with a company and a lance of five light, six medium and five heavy mechs supported by another ASF lance. The mercenary ships alone grant us three companies of

Mechs, three infantry platoons and a company plus a lance of ASFs."

"A full battalion of Mechs. Compared to our forces, that is a very strong detachment, Colonel, roughly a third of our combat worthy Mech complement and we still haven't got a single ASF deployed here. The only positive aspect is the negligible infantry force. And we all know the mercenary complements will grow faster than Earth troop complements, at least in the beginning. I am absolutely sure we will receive extra funding and troops just to watch your newcomers. Nothing against those priests, but..."

"Yes, Sir, I see the problem. Even parts of the Ummah are very, very skeptical against these fighters and non-Islamic states will see it as a possible weapon against them." Politics. Oh how he hated it.

"Even if we can trust the truce offered by Islamic extremists – and everyone knows many of them use Islam as a convenient cover only – they still present a big problem. We basically have a Word of Blake problem here." Davis looked at Al Azim sharply "How long till they decide to blow their cover and reveal their real aims?"

"There is an old Arab saying, General. 'Me and my brother against our cousin, and me and my cousin against the enemy.' For a long time, your 'West' was considered the enemy. Now most of the sane Islamic terrorists on Earth consider it a cousin. The main question still is: How many of them are sane and really faithful? Even the insane of the faithful will defend Earth – Mecca – to the last drop of their blood, even if it means taking a Nuke into a warship on their own body." Both men shuddered at that thought. "Now it is good the Coalition started programs to get every nation on Earth to at least the economical status you call 'emerging market' to fight the roots of terrorism. Even if it's 'only' to maximize Earth economic capabilities."

Davis nodded. "It is a nice by-product... if it works out. By now, my first concern about this is how it will affect corruption and strategic production. Concerning the pilgrims again, we have to keep them away from extremists, which will be problematic on the hajj. We don't want them to attack the Coalition and we definitely don't want to export Islamic extremism into the Sphere."

Azim winced. He definitely knew some people in the Combine considered him and his people not much better than Earth saw petty terrorists. "The hajj I was part of was more than two million people strong. This is bigger than many planetary populations. You have to actively try to run into an extremist there."

Davis nodded, trusting that the Colonel knew what he was talking about. Earth, the CSN, and the GDI had enough problems as it was. Exporting extremism to the Inner Sphere and/or bolstering it at home was not something they all needed right now. Hopefully Aladdin al Azim, the Saudi King, and others would be able to keep everything nice and level...at least he prayed they could.

Port Krin Spaceport, Antallos **March 6th, 2007**

General Davis, Aladdin al Azim, Ambassador Smith and many more officials waited on the space port as a single Union class dropship landed upon a column of fire, flanked by two heavy ASFs. Plans to keep Artillery ready had been cancelled after Al Azim had remarked the ASFs would watch for everything looking like artillery, as Chalid's men had seen the tapes of the battle of Port Krin. Showing open hostility would only result in an invasion from what could have become allies.

The ramp of a union opened and four Blackjack Mechs emerged from it in perfect order, securing the area, and ready to open fire with their massive arm guns at moment's notice if necessary. They took their places after making a thorough check of the area.

Five other Dropships stayed between high atmosphere and high orbit, all their troops prepared for a combat drop and ASFs ready to start behind open bay doors. The sentiment was clear: Attack us with artillery, get your answer in combat dropped Mechs, vehicles and ASF bombardment runs. At the moment, their powerful targeting RADARs weren't activated, but otherwise it was clear Port Krin and everything GDI/CSN was watched closely.

Down at the spaceport, a white-robed man in his late fifties left the dropship, coming to the CSN congregation with their four

Battlemasters. "As-Salāmu `Alaykum, Mullah Al Azim."

"Wa `Alaykum as-Salaam, Mullah Chalid." both men bowed and it became apparent Chalid wore an actual scimitar with his robes

"I see you prefer it the personal way." Azim smiled as he noticed it.

"Yes. Risking good men for things I can do myself would be a waste. We saw the battle of Port Krin."

"May I introduce you to General Davis. He was in command at the battle." the General bowed and Chalid did the same.

"An ingenious way to fight. But not unbeatable."

"No way of fighting is unbeatable, Mullah."

"That is true, General." the Azami added, bowing slightly to show he meant no challenge or offense with his words.

Al Azim gestured to the next person with him "Ambassador Smith of the CSN."

"As-Salāmu `Alaykum"

"Wa `Alaykum as-Salaam. You understand you'll have a problem if I decide your... 'Mecca' is a lie, ambassador."

"Oh, you will see the truth, Mullah. Only you can decide for yourself, after seeing it with your own eyes."

"We are in agreement, then." Chalid looked at Al Azim "Tell me why you deserve to live, Mullah if this should prove to be yet another false hope for the faithful."

"Oh, this is simple, my friend, there are indeed already the faithful on that world. We are among brothers.""

"You mean...?"

"I got an invitation from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." the handed a letter over to Chalid, who opened it sceptically and read it several times.

"Ali Al Saud, King of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, Commander of the Saudi National Guard, Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia?"

"That is his earthly title, yes."

Chalid folded the letter and handed it back. "You say that you may bring up to ten people to judge the truth... then so be it. When will your next ship leave?"

"Tomorrow. The jumpship is waiting for us."

"I will be prepared." he gave a signal and the Mechs became a bit less alert while the ASFs began to land and the ships in orbit closed their bay doors. All they did made clear those were professionals, completely unlike the pirate scum that GDI had faced before.

Port Krin Spaceport, Antallos **March 7th, 2007, 0000Z**

A single Union class dropship was waiting for the men coming to visit Earth. Ten quarters had been prepared and the captain had orders to ask for Muslim support once they reached Sol. The ships on this trip had been prepared better than usual while the crew used their one day delay caused by the new arrivals.

Earth/Moon pirate point, Sol System, Grantville Cluster **March 7th, 2007, 2200Z**

The last jumpship in the circuit appeared in the Sol system. Its Earth-built computer system took a second to establish the correct result of the jump and started to broadcast ID codes immediately. A high priority message had been prepared and sent.

From: Colonel Aladdin al Azim, GDI foreign Legion
To: Sol Traffic Control, King Ali Al Saud of Saudi Arabia

The Hajj has begun. Dropship "GDI Admiral Nelson" is transporting ten spheroid VIPs on the invitation of his majesty.

**Free Azami Army base near Mecca, Saudia Arabia, Earth,
Grantville cluster.
March 8th, 2007, 0900Z**

The Union lowered to the ground on the freshly constructed landing strip on a column of fire, greeted by an honour guard of Mechs. The passengers did not care. They stood at a large window and stared at the city they had thought lost forever, still not believing it was real.

A few VTOLs had landed near the Mechs and a man clad in rich garments stood before them. There was a group of other men, none of them warriors. Mullah Chalid left the dropper first and walked over to the men.

The rich-clad man bowed. "Mullah Chalid, I greet you on Saudi Arabian ground. I am Ali Al Saud. Those men are the members of the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fataawa, Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy of the Al-Azhar University of Cairo, President Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia." He went on to introduce high ranking officials of every branch of Islam, many of them having religious authority.

"Mullah Chalid of the Azami Brotherhood. I am escorted by five other Ulema, including my Mufti, as well as four simple warriors. I have to admit, I am a bit... astonished. I was told you had copied Mecca, but you could not have possibly terraformed a world to contain all Africa, with the Sahara Desert in its proper place. And everything else... it fits. This... it cannot be!" he whispered hoarsely. "What -is- this place? What -are- you?!"

The King of Saudi Arabia smiled gently. "Just a man, sahib, just a man. But Allah moves in mysterious ways. Let us discuss this while we go to see the Kaaba."

"Y-yes, that is a good plan."

papal letter, orbital infrastructure

**Nearly every single catholic church on Earth, Grantville.
May 6th, 2007**

The priest carried the Bible to his pulpit, opened it and started, "This is the Gospel according to Matthew:

"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me. Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'

Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' These will go away into eternal punishment, but

the righteous into eternal life."

The priest closed the Bible, kissed it and picked up a letter laying ready on the pulpit.

"Dear Congregation, these words are as true today as they had ever been. As Christians we have not just a duty to God but to our fellow man. We cannot just turn away and pretend that evil does not exist. It is my pleasure to say to you that Rome wrote us a letter. Listen to the words of our Pope Benedict XVI." He cleared his throat and started to read it.

"My beloved brothers and sisters, I greet you.

We are living in hard times, maybe even harder than the times in my youth when war wrecked the world. Earth was under attack, and while we will do everything to gain peace, it will be a long and difficult task. The question of Theodicy, the question why evil exists, is coming up as often as never since world war two. And it is a good question. The people from the stars want to either take or destroy what we possess – industrial power, knowledge, relics. And yet, this is only politics. Still, they are human beings. Many people in the sphere need to reconsider 'Remember, O man, that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return', but so do many people on Earth.

God took us from our universe and placed us here, in a world of hurt, bloodshed and war. In a world going to enter an interstellar stone age. Why did He do it? The Lord moves in mysterious ways, but still, this appears to be simple. It should not lead us into the trap of thinking it is simple because it appears to be, but we still should not ignore this interpretation:

We are here to help.

If you think Latin America, Africa or even war torn-regions in the first world were difficult tasks, look up to the stars. Politics and media tell us they are filled with warlords, machines of war and doom.

This is true. But it is not the whole truth. On many of them, farmers work hard to feed their families in poverty because generations of feudal

warlords forgot humbleness and destroyed what they could not conquer. Young people have no choice but to enter slavery as they had no chance to learn a good vocation because an order hiding behind religion works hard to keep people uneducated. Children die while their parents watch because of raids of pirates, looters, rapists and marauders, just like many of Earth's citizens did a mere two years ago. We have managed to defend ourselves, to turn the enemy's strengths against themselves. For so many out there, there is only the brutal acceptance of their helplessness. They suffer. They suffer and they endure, for there is nothing else.

I know many of you doubt the use of helping the people in the Sphere. It will just help the House Lords to arm up and attack each other again, or ourselves, is a misgiving I hear often enough. War is the fact of life in the Inner Sphere, made ceremonial but still murdering many. It is inevitable, that once more worlds would be bloodied for the ambitions of the few.

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Politics shall never be more important than human beings. Our own church had epochs in which we forgot this, and had to learn it the hard way again. We still collect enemies because of this.

Now, the Lord gave us a second chance. And I will take upon it. We may not forget one thing: A human being born under the light of another star still is a human being.

Will the Lord look at us if the day comes and say those people were not worth our effort? Does He not love every single human being?

We are displaced into the Middle Ages again, writ large in space, and without the uniting influence of our Church to temper the abuse of the aristocracy. Too many of those in power feel accountable only to themselves, to their fears and their desires, than the everlasting judgement of God. There is an organization that mimicks how our Church is seen through the distorted lens of history, but they do not seek to alleviate the suffering of man but rather with trickery and murder seek to throw down all of mankind into greater suffering, that they might rule the ashes of civilization. The Catholic Church as known in the Inner Sphere is fractured, warring upon itself, and far too many worlds are left hungry and helpless in the dark, given not the sustenance of bread for the body or hope for the spirit. We are here. Can we simply look away and say, **'they**

are not our people'? "They are not our problem"? Are they not our brothers and sisters in Christ? What kind of people are we? It is by our actions that we shall be judged.

*My brothers and sisters, help me to show the church has changed and is on the side of the just, the poor and the neglected. Because God gave us two guidelines for a situation such as this: To the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of His, even the least of them, you did it to Him. And **Love your enemies.**"*

A long line of people had already gathered when it was time for the intercession.

"For those who hold to the task on Earth and Antallos. Give them the wisdom and sight to find the right way in this crisis as well as the power to take it to its end."

"Lord hear us."

"For those in power in the Inner Sphere and beyond, give them the wisdom to see their errors, the strength to accept this and the power to do something about this."

"Lord hear us."

"For the people in the Inner Sphere and beyond. Give them the strength to bear their situation, the opportunity to hear about a better life and ways to accomplish it."

"Lord hear us."

"For the people on Terra. Give them a way to be free of the devil that is Comstar and its lies."

"Lord hear us."

"For the people on Earth. Give them the strength to hold out, the patience to endure it and the wisdom not to act in revenge."

"Lord hear us."

"For the forces of GDI. Let them be strong, fair, just and wise enough to know when the fighting is done."

"Lord hear us."

"For the invaders on Earth. Help them to find salvation."

"Lord hear us."

"For the Christians and churches in the Sphere. Let them find their way to You, and give Your Church a way to end the schism."

"Lord hear us."

"For those neglected before we made contact, give those in power the wisdom and strength not to forget them in this crisis."

"Lord hear us."

Essen, Germany, Earth, Grantville Cluster May 8th, 2007

Essen, German Steel manufacturer ThyssenKrupp today announced the construction of its own Asimov-class company space stations "Friedrich Krupp", "Von Braun", "Oberth" and "Alfried Krupp". The four 15,000 ton stations will be build in the corporate shipyards in Hamburg, Kiel, Skaramagas and the subterranean Swedish facility and lifted by a dropship rented from GDI. Each of them will include an endosteel mill, armor production facilities, material science labs, the minimum weapons loadout required by GDI-lifted structures and a 42 meter grav deck delivering 0.15 gravities.

The new corporate headquarters still being built in Essen, Germany, will be supplemented by a corporate spaceport and a small orbital worker training facility. The company hopes to have the first station completed in June 2008 and the first production run in orbit completed in late 2008.

The shipyards used are being enlarged to service at least two 300 Meter long, 50 Meter diameter objects such as the Asimov simultaneously at each facility, with Hamburg, Kiel and Skaramagas surpassing this minimum and offering capacity for three of those each. Each of them but Sweden is capable to build a single object that size by now, with Sweden being completed later this month.

Company patriarch Berthold Beitz, being elected to CEO in late 2006, said the company already had orders over several kilotons of armor and lightweight structural material from civilian companies they would be glad to deliver as soon as all production plants are retooled and built, a process that has already been delayed by half a year due to unexpected problems with applying memory core technology to

contemporary infrastructure with contemporary workers. He expected no further delays, though.

The company still has the same problems as corporations worldwide finding qualified workers, the global market for engineers being swept empty and MemoryCore classes not delivering enough personnel in an acceptable time frame. CSN leaders are debating the topic, while incomes for Engineers skyrocket like nothing since the 2000 dot com-boom and many companies start to retrain older employees and career changers. Still, unemployment rates have dropped to a historic low and it is a bit problematic to find good workers.

When asked about the several Companies under the name of Krupp in the Inner Sphere, Beitz, who is commonly called 'the last of the Krupps', said "Alfried Krupp made me the executor of his will and I cannot imagine he would have wanted his name used like this. He did not like the HJ using 'hart wie Kruppstahl' and I see this abuse of his name in much the same light. We will have to discuss this, and while I do not expect spheroid corporate managers to give in at first whim, I will invite them to the place the first factory was founded and hold talks in the Villa Hügel, Krupp's old house. This should improve our position a lot."

Pirate Point, Armington V, Armington System
Federated Suns
27th May 3022(2007)

Her breathing resounded within her helmet loudly. That and the now familiar thudding of her racing heart were her only companions in the duel she was locked in. The evasive course changes she threw her Transgressor into were rapid, well practised and those of a veteran. The enemy was stupidly and desperately blasting lasers ineffectively her way – she couldn't see the lasers, but her Radcom T11 computer did, and drew the deadly beams seeking to kill her onto her radar displays.

Her opponent's desperation was somewhat justified by the fact that the pirate scum trying to kill her was flying a Tomahawk light fighter. It was a decent ASF, and in the hands of a competent pilot it might have even been troublesome. However the fool had apparently forgotten that the Tomahawk had that slight overheating problem, and was a lousy marksman besides.

Pirates Haven was clearly scraping the bottom of the barrel.

She twisted on her controls; to bring her Transgressor's aft to bear while she maintained her forward momentum, and timed two shots from her aft Medium Laser. One missed, while the other gave a glancing blow to the nose of the Tomahawk. She gunned her throttle to shoot forward on a new course, jinking and weaving relative to the Tomahawk whose retaliatory laser strikes missed above and below her.

Time to end this, she thought ruthlessly. She made sure her G-suit was fully inflated to the point that it was painful, and began breathing hard to increase blood flow to her brain.

Firing attitude thrusters, she pushed her Transgressor into positive motion on its Z-axis, while simultaneously twisting it to bring her fore armament to bear on the pirate, who was now rapidly attempting evasives of his own. He had been locked on her tail and, thinking he had her dead to rights, had lost all situational awareness

in his bloodlust to kill the infamous (at least as far as the scum of Pirate's Haven was concerned) Colonel Feng Xue-Lin.

Xue-Lin had been carefully managing her heat capacity over the course of this defensive engagement, and, straining against the g-forces threatening to give her a Brownout, triggered all three forward facing Large Lasers. They blasted into the left wing of the Tomahawk, melting almost half the armour away, and putting the pirate's own wing-mounted Large Laser out of commission.

She stabilized her Transgressor on a new course, and the g-forces eased up. The pirate, having lost a good portion of his damage potential, was now retreating back to the Pirate Jumpship at the maximum thrust his craft was capable of. In a straight line, the Tomahawk easily, outran the Colonel's own fighter; closing the distance was impossible.

"Nāozhǒng!" she snarled over the common radio band at the pirate. She lined up her three Large Lasers and blasted into the as yet untouched aft armor of the Tomahawk just as it exited max range envelope. Two thirds of the pirate's aft armour was slagged, and Xue-Lin thought she might have nicked an engine emitter, but it did nothing to slow the Tomahawk down, as it had gained all the momentum it would need to outrun her. Nevertheless, she moved into a pursuit course.

She turned her radio back to the squadron channel; listening to the reports and comms of the rest of her Squadron as they harassed the other three pirate ASFs, two Dropships, and the Invader Jumpship that had intruded into Armington space. These gǒuzǎizi never learn, she thought. Then again, she wouldn't have it any other way; if the bastards started fighting intelligently they might just succeed in inflicting headaches or even casualties amongst her people.

But Armington was just too tempting a target for the pirates from the unimaginatively named 'Pirates Haven Cluster'. Armington was a 'break-basket' world, its long seasons and extremely large amounts of arable land meant that it was a virtual farmer's paradise. Armington literally fed most of the worlds within two jumps with perishable foods, and shipped grain throughout the Federated Suns. FedSun

Jumpships moved in and out of the Nadir and Zenith Jump points almost every day to ship the harvested food supplies.

Hence, the reason why Hanse Davion, after getting tired of the constant shortfalls of food shipments being lost to pirates, had hired a mercenary ASF force to secure Armington space, namely her squadron and its attached Lance of Mechs. One would think that the Armington Local Militia would've welcomed this long overdue reinforcement, as they barely had the capacity to do more than offer token resistance to a pirate raid. They didn't.

"Go away, Cappies! We don't want you here! I don't know what Hanse Davion's thinking, letting you into the system."

A fairly understandable sentiment from the Militia Commander, since he was a 5th Syrtis Fusiliers veteran. The Armington Farmer's Association on the other hand was completely different and they didn't care one whit about the politics, past or present. They were just happy that *'them skew eye folks'* were finally keeping the pirates at bay and off their lands, and that they didn't have to bribe or pay off pirates with food shipments to keep from getting killed anymore. They even started to make decent profit again. Xue-Lin and her people were always welcome at the tables of the various farmers to share in a homely meal, and the pantry onboard The Sage was well-stocked at all times.

As for Hanse Davion's thinking...well, he trusted Xue-Lin as much as he trusted any merc company in his employ; he had the traditional leash of purse-strings of course, but he also knew of her personal motivations for wanting to obliterate every hardcore pirate on this side of the Sphere. More than anything else, that was what he trusted most.

She was now approaching the Pirate Point, and happy to see that both pirate Union dropships were looking distinctly worse off after tangling with her squadron. She could see the black scars where the Union's had been almost neatly declawed with precision LL and PPC fire, and both were already docked with the Invader – which was taking potshots at the other nine Transgressors and single Leopard of her Squadron that had taken up station outside of weapons range.

The pirate that she had been fighting with lost another few layers of armor when he passed into PPC range of the Leopard, and was completely destroyed when another Transgressor added it's thee LLs to the equation.

Xue-Lin watched her screens with amusement, while she flipped her fighter over to decelerate and join the screening formation. The wreckage of the Tomahawk were still continuing on its trajectory towards the Invader, and the pirate gunners there were now frantically blasting the debris into ever smaller pieces, managing to even vaporize a few chunks. However, they couldn't get everything before numerous fragments slashed large gashes onto the side armour of the Jumpship, but didn't do much more damage.

She tuned her radio into the squadron frequency. "Nice initiative there, Lotus 2."

"We really need to get some Marines on the payroll, Lotus Lead. I hate this part."

"It's in the budget for next year, I promise." The CO of the Shī Fēixíng Squadron announced wistfully. "Then again if that rén chā on Armington would've just assigned us a few squads of infantry we could've boarded these wáng bā and seized the Jumpship."

"We surely could put that Invader and those Unions to good use, Lotus Lead."

"That we could, Lotus 3...that we could..."

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Pirate Point, Armington V
Federated Suns
1st June 3022(2007)

The modified Scout-class Jumpship *The Sage* hung in the void of space orientated towards the star so its jumpsail could pull in the solar energy for its use in the KF Drive. In its wardroom the nine

pilots and four Mechwarriors that called the ship home sat in the zero gravity waiting for the boss to arrive.

Major Shen Tai-Shi was rather uncomfortable at the head of the small formation of chairs. Their commander had been very conspicuous in her absence of late, ever since they had received that message via Armington V's HPG from their FedSun employers. She had also literally taken The Sage's astrogator hostage within the Planning room for the last two days, only emerging for something to eat and bathroom breaks not to mention monopolizing the onboard computer mainframe for something.

One of the mechwarriors spoke his displeasure. "Why are we sitting with our fingers up our asses here? We've got exercises scheduled with the Armington Militia today."

"Honestly, Tai-Rong, haven't you got tired of beating those fools yet?" an ASF pilot laughed.

"No, their bumbling efforts provide me endless hours of amusement and if that wears off, it always makes my day to see that Syrty's face after our Lance foils yet another of his 'schemes' to bring us down."

The room was briefly filled with laughter, which was interrupted when the door hissed open and Colonel Feng's petite figure was framed within it. It never ceased to amaze Shen how despite her small stature, she could still make this room filled with big mechwarriors and ASF pilots (who while not so big, still stood half a head over her) shut their mouths so quickly and sit straighter in respect. Her presence filled the wardroom with a near tangible weight.

Her black hair tied up in a bun with two stylish chopsticks (both of which Shen knew were disguised needles that he really did not want to see ever piercing his skin) served to accentuate her high cheekbones. Her dark, near black, hazel eyes surveyed the room and its occupants critically, before pulling herself forward to float towards the small holoprojector.

She pulled herself down, threading her feet into the jury rigged

footstraps specially placed there to keep her down and tapped a few buttons on its control console and a graphic diagram of a very familiar solar system appeared – the single known and mapped system in the Pirates Haven Cluster; three terrestrial planets, only the second being habitable, with an asteroid belt preceding two Jovian type gas giants.

"Good afternoon...pilots, I trust you are all well rested by now from the latest raid attempt. Mechwarriors, I think that fighting those buckets of the Armington Militia is making you soft. I think you need a nice challenge for once." She tapped a button and the Jump denial zones were overlaid onto the hologram, including the Zenith, Nadir and Pirate points. Angry red dots and Mandarin characters appeared next around those jump points. "For a long time, Pirates Haven One has made themselves immune to a surprise counter-raid by stationing heavily armed Dropships at all the possible jump points we could use, negating the advantage of *The Sage's* tiny emergence signature. So... we won't use them."

Shen blinked as that idea rumbled through his brain as he was sure it was doing the same amongst all the other pilots.

"We choose our own emergence point...here." A new spot was highlighted in the display, it was beyond the star's spherical jump denial zone, an eighth of an AU Z-plus of the Zenith. "Yes, it's not a proven point but in theory there should be nothing there to interfere with the jump. We know the general orbital paths of every major object in that system; the chances of a random piece of rock or anybody else being up there is negligible. I've gone over this with the Astrogator and while he's highly reluctant to use anything other than a standard point or a proven pirate point, I've *convinced* him on the merits of this."

Shen had to suppress an amused snort. Knowing the Colonel she had either pressed one of her needles against his neck, or given him a pay raise, probably both.

"In two weeks when the standard FedSun Jumpship will be arriving to pick up produce, accompanying it will be two Tramps, holding five Excalibur Dropships from the 7th Crucis Lancers. This sixth collar

will be for our Leopard."

Everyone in the room looked at each other with wide excited eyes; that could only mean one thing, a moment that all of them had been looking forward to for nearly three years was approaching.

Shen drunk in the sight of Xue-Lin actually smiling; it was rare to see that.

"Our job is to jump into the system undetected, accelerate for an hour at one g, coast for six days on our momentum, then attack the Zenith Point with surprise on our side. Destroying any dropships stationed there on guard duty that could possibly contest the emergence of the Crucis Lancers. They will arrive there at a set coordinated time, so we can't afford any delays in securing the jump point. The dropships will launch and burn for the planet. The squadron will then dock with the Sage, by the time the dropships arrive at the second planet, our jump drive will be recharged. We'll then do an in-system jump to the pirate point to launch and give air support to the Lancers as they go about their business of burning out the scum that infests this system of the Cluster."

The entire wardroom slammed their hands onto the small desks attached to their chairs in agreement with that sentiment.

"You'll also be happy to know that we'll be assigned a detachment of Marines for our Leopard, which will be assaulting any Jumpships we catch flatfooted at the Zenith point. Davion has promised that we will have the first pick of any Jumpship that is captured, while the rest will have FedSun flags painted on them. The main objective of this is two-fold; we want to capture a Jumpship Captain alive, and the jump coordinates of every pirate holding in the Cluster to develop a proper map."

Shen raised his hand. "Colonel, why now? We've been advising Davion with reports that it would be better to conquer the Haven Cluster ever since we set up shop here in Armington."

"You all saw the news of that new Periphery nation and what they did to Antallos," Xue-Lin explained. "The strategy of non-standard

jump points was observed being used by this CSN. Well, Davion wants to show that the FedSuns can do the same and even better."

"No periphery power is going to upstage a great house." Tai-Rong mocked.

"Our job then is to scout these target systems in the Cluster undetected, then report back for the Crucis Lancers to continue their campaign. Of course, once Armington is relatively secure, and our sworn revenge on that hǎidào shǐdàn on Haven is complete; Davion has secured our services to travel to the Malam system and use it as a base to start raiding ops on New Haiti and New Gascony. Other Merc Units will be contracted to raid the others."

Shen was incredulous. "To what end? We'll be the equivalent of pinpricks against the Dominions..."

"Davion has obviously not enlightened me on his grand plan, Major. But I can see the obvious effect of our raids on the Pirate Lords, to keep their attention on the closest FedSun border."

Shen's eyes widened in realization. "The Crucis Lancers."

"Exactly." Xue-Lin nodded with a satisfied grin. "That's what I would do. Fix their attention on the obvious, while striking from the shadows with the real dagger."

Nāozhǒng! (Coward!) ; gǒuzǎizi (sons of bitches); Shī Fēixíng (Flying Lions) ; wáng bā (sons of bitches) ; rén chā (useless person) ; hǎidào shǐdàn (pirate shit)

**Sheikh Rashid Hall
Dubai International Convention Centre
Earth, Coalition of Sovereign Nations
Grantville Cluster
21st June 2007**

One hundred and ninety three.

That was the magical number today. When all was counted, there were representatives from that many widely recognized sovereign nations gathered within the seven thousand seven hundred square meter capacity hall. As each nation in the CSN didn't just send a single chosen representative, but also a support staff with each member, it meant just about one thousand five hundred and forty four people were here today, at the start of the first ever CSN Assembly.

And already there were clear signs that everyone here didn't want to return to the dog and pony of the old UN. While the support staff were in the rear tiered seats, the main representatives were all seated on the bottom floor behind desks arranged in a large rectangle that all faced each other. There was no 'Security Council'. There was no 'Big Five', and no Power of Veto. There were one hundred and ninety three equals sitting at the main table. Some of the representatives were actual Heads of State; others were Foreign Ministers of their respective nation or deputy Ministers.

The din in the vast hall was not deafening, but was definitely at the level of a low roar.

The question of organization and conducting the Assembly in an orderly manner was first addressed. Each representative had at their arrival been given a secret unique ballot, in which they obviously couldn't vote for themselves, but could vote for one of the other CSN reps as the Temporary Chairman to administer proceedings.

From a central seat, Fredrik Reinfeldt, wondered what on earth had gone through the minds of everyone who had voted for him to be Chairman of the first Assembly. Perhaps he had been seen as the 'compromise' choice...a person who could keep the big states happy, since his foreign policy favoured pro-EU, pro-US/West relations, and his party was a member of International Democrat Union; a decidedly conservative organization. Sweden's Moderate Party was more liberal in certain key aspects – which kept the numerous Republics of the third world happy, in addition to Sweden's image as a 'neutral' country. And finally, since Sweden was still a hybrid of Constitutional Monarchy and Parliamentary Democracy, it satisfied the monarchs in

the UK and Middle East too.

The Prime Minister of Sweden looked at his watch, and then pushed on the button below the microphone to enable it. He stood and tapped on it, and his voice was blasted across the expansive hall. "Ladies and Gentlemen, please come to order." There was a brief lull in the din of conversation that abruptly was replaced by noise of people taking their seats in the tiers, and the CSN delegates scraping their chairs into position behind the main table. Cameras of the world media were at the edges of the hall and he suddenly became acutely aware that his face was probably being beamed into TV sets in a lot of homes around the globe. The interest in this first Assembly of what was essentially the governing body that represented the interests of the entire Earth was extremely great.

He took a subtle deep breath, and looked at his prepared notes. "Ladies and Gentlemen, on this day, the twenty first of June in the two thousand and seventh year of the Common Era, we have achieved the unprecedented. For the first time, the representatives of the Coalition of Sovereign Nations have gathered under one roof, in the spirit of cooperation and mutual defence of our planet. We are all here as equals – no more are we to be held back by the past, but we shouldn't forget it and the lessons it has bestowed upon us."

"Now we must look to the present and the future. We are all poised on the precipice of realizing a dream. A dream of a global human society based on prosperity for all and an end to the islands of wealth, surrounded by a sea of poverty. Fusion power has the potential to a near complete end to scarcity, an end to world hunger by making bulk transportation efficient and inexpensive. It has opened our Solar System and its bounty to us. Within a relatively short time and with a concerted effort, Earth no longer needs to strain under the effect of fossil fuel emissions from millions of cars and numerous coal and gas power plants. The Kearny Fuchida Drive has given us access to other stars and the resources around them as well. It has opened up a new frontier for us all to explore and build communities in, and they will in the fullness of time grow and join us as their own sovereign nation within this Coalition, if they so choose."

"Now we must also acknowledge the dangers beyond the Grantville Cluster, which would try to strip away our dream of a better future for all humanity. Five large star nations who have since the fall of the Star League waged war on each other for simple hubris and the sake of war itself. They have prosecuted their agenda's in three massive wars across the stars, driven themselves into an Interstellar Dark Age, and yet they still claw at each other's throats, and would see us as a means to attack their rivals or regain so called 'lostech' to acquire the technological advantage to renew their conflicts with vigour. But they are merely the prelude to the danger of the descendants of the SLDF living beyond the Deep Periphery, waiting for the day when they try to bring the Inner Sphere under their heel. Let us also not forget of the threat of the pirate dominions...and the terrible cost they inflicted on our planet. Antallos, while a hub for them, was only one such location. The Tortuga Dominion is virtual mecca of human slavery and other depredations, whose existence any civilized nation cannot bear."

"If we are to meet the challenges of the future, we can't afford division, and we can't afford internal conflict in the face of these challenges. As a Coalition, we desire only peace and prosperity for all, but to get that we must unfortunately resort to strength of arms. It is something we do reluctantly, but we do not shirk the responsibility."

"Beginning today, and over the next two weeks, we will lay the groundwork for achieving the goals of a prosperous tomorrow. The issues that face us and that we must determine policy for are numerous and will impact the lives and fate of every person on this planet." The temporary Chairman of the Coalition Assembly regarded his fellow delegates sombrelly. "Let's begin..."

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**Sheikh Rashid Hall
Dubai International Convention Centre
Earth, Coalition of Sovereign Nations
Grantville Cluster
25th June 2007**

Fredrik Reinfeldt was beginning to think that they would need a whole separate conference just to deal with the one issue that had been going back and forth between the members of Assembly for the last three days. He had felt unbridled optimism as the within the first day they had managed to whittle down the official CSN flag design to only four options and officially ratified the GDI's role and structure with the only amendment being the renaming of the GDI Navy to GDI Fleet.

Then the trillion Euro issue came up on the agenda...colonization. It began with a nice presentation by the new Chief of the CSN Colony Directorate, on how a colony on Tau Ceti or any other habitable world in the Grantville cluster could be technically achieved. He had masterfully whittled down a three hundred page technical and procedural document to a half-an-hour presentation that was remarkably understandable.

The technical matters of colonization aside, the major obstacle was what happened to the citizenship status of any colonist from a nation within the Coalition, since they were in essence going off to start a whole new nation within the fullness of time. Should the colonists keep their passports? Should they be given dual citizenship of both the Colony and their Nation of origin? Should there be issued a CSN Passport for Colonists that would allow free travel to any CSN member nation?

Fredrik thought the latter would be a best in the long run. There would be no imitation of the Terran Hegemony's mistakes. The problem was when that CSN Passport came back to Earth; it would be a Master key to any country within it. Citizens that remained on Earth were still limited to the relevant Visa and Passport Controls that regulated international movement...they would see Colonists getting this preferential treatment and demand their own CSN Passport since weren't they also part of the CSN.

If the CSN Passport was issued to everyone, what would it do for the international flow of workers? They would flow from the third world to the rich countries en masse in search of jobs...no...that path lead to ruination, and CSN could not afford to falter

The answer was thankfully provided by US Secretary of State, Scott Adler. When the colonist arrives back on Earth for a visit, the CSN passport would be treated like a passport from his/her country of origin. Fredrik was at once reminded of the simple analogy 'KISS' – Keep it simple stupid

The next contentious issue was 'who and from which country to send to a Colony'. The fact that Colonization would be entirely voluntary alleviated this somewhat, but what mix of people should be sent? The first facet of this problem was maintaining genetic diversity, then there was the ideological problem, a Colony could not fracture along Earth nationalistic lines – a Colonist had to agree in theory at least to forsake the land of his birth to form a new nation with its own new history to eventually enrich the Coalition as a whole.

That brought about the argument of establishing the criteria for admittance into the CSN of any new Colony. It took another day to hammer a policy out that everyone could live with.

By day six of the conference, Fredrik Reinfeldt was sure he would lose what little remained of his hair by the end.

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A General Colonization Plan, as finalized by the 1st CSN Assembly on the 4th July 2007

Colonization of Tau Ceti IV (and other celestial bodies)

With the confirmation from the National Geographic Grantville Cluster survey team during their brief re-supply stop in Sol, of a habitable biosphere in Tau Ceti, giving considerable proof that the Battletech Sourcebook references to habitable planets in the Cluster is accurate – an exciting brand new era opens for Earth. Colonization of the New Frontier.

What follows is a general outline of a Colonization

Plan as developed by the CSN Colony Directorate. It can be tailored and adjusted for any world as needed.

Method:

The building of a colony, whether on an airless moon, asteroid or ideally on a habitable planet requires the presence of the following:

- Water
- Initial Food Supplies, seedlings and equipment for further production
- Space
- People
- Construction Materials (Imported from Earth initially and then mined locally)
- Reliable and renewable energy generation
- Transportation
- Communications locally and with Earth
- Life Support (Hostile Environments only)
- Simulated Gravity (Orbital, N.E.O. planetoid, Moon settlements)
- Radiation Protection

We will focus only on what would be needed for Tau Ceti IV and similar planets.

Water

The National Geographic (NG) Survey found that the planet has perhaps only ten percent less water surface area than Earth does, which is an insignificant difference. Fresh water flows in great rivers, including a memorable one that makes the Mississippi River look somewhat on the narrow side.

Food

The NG team has catalogued numerous examples of

the various mammalian native animal life and plants present on the planet, and it is clear that they would need a lifetime to do a proper study of them all. Long term study into the nature of these will be needed to determine if they are fit for human consumption. Initially, the Colony will need to subsist on imported food until this can be determined. On the possibility of growing Earth fruits, grains and vegetables on Tau Ceti IV; the conditions are suitable for them to flourish here, but the local flora will need to be removed beforehand or the Earth flora isolated in Greenhouses.

People

The GDI Colonization Directorate has accepted and adapted the work of Conservation Biologists Franklin and Soule on the minimum population size of a colony to maintain long term genetic diversity; Five hundred permanent colonists, consisting of fifty five percent female, forty five percent male, with randomly selected genetic diversity from various Earth strains – African, European, Asian, Eurasian, Central American and Oceanic. The Directorate would also prioritize existing families to colonize any planet, but would allow anyone wishing to settle in the new frontier to do so – there will be no economic or skill discrimination, since the colony will need every hand, be it unskilled or skilled, rich or poor, to pitch in and do their share of the work.

The population size of Tau Ceti IV will obviously be much greater than just the minimum 500, but genetic diversity proportions will be maintained as civilians are cleared for their journey to the planet.

Construction Materials

Tau Ceti IV has been tentatively confirmed by NG team as having significant deposits of metals and

rare chemicals. A proper mining survey team from AngloGold Ashanti has been dispatched with the returning NG team to give a final verdict. The most significant resources for any Colony are iron, aluminium, titanium, and silicon; bringing these from Earth isn't economical in the slightest, and Mining operations will most likely be the first priority of any colony after the initial necessities of living are met. Also a priority is Germanium, the foundations of what makes Interstellar travel possible.

Energy

While Fusion Power plants are being constructed at present time on Earth, production at the moment is woefully below needs and estimates are that Earthside production will remain low for the next four years and will only start increasing in significant quantities somewhere around 2010. It is therefore our conclusion that a Tau Ceti Colony will need to initially use the Dropships they arrived in to provide energy.

The Directorate is currently liaising with the Joint Space Alliance Company on designing a dedicated Colony Dropship based on the Monarch Class to make landing on a planet, whereupon it would detach its Modular style KF Boom and essentially become a Town Hall, Power Plant, Hospital and a SLDF Class Advanced Multipurpose Factory all in one package.

Communication

With communication satellites in orbit around Tau Ceti IV, local radio and cellular communication for colonists with each other will not be a problem. It is contact with Earth that problems begin to arise. Initially, communication data could be transferred

via the Jumpship that will be assigned to link Earth and Tau Ceti. With the current shortage of Jumpships though, that is not a long term option.

As of the writing of this report, the HPG Class A Installation retrieved from Columbus is nearing final readiness for reactivation. It's the proposal of the Directorate that the HPG Ground Mobile A Class also retrieved there be used for the Tau Ceti Colony, only after it has been thoroughly studied. With this and appropriate encryption, the Colony will have a Terabyte capacity comlink with Earth in real time.

Transport

Local Transport needs will initially have to be met with standard ICE vehicles brought from Earth, meaning that the Colony will initially need to be shipped petrol to keep these running. The Directorate is also working with Mercedes into research of the 25 Series of Fusion Engine for use in all terrain ground cars and the 55 Series for trucks and other earthmoving equipment. The first prototypes are expected to be ready by next year and will see mass production by 2010.

The Colony will also need a reliable aerospace craft for various needs; the Leopard Class Aerodyne Dropship will fit this role, both in transport capacity, versatility, and defence. Localized airlift and assembly could also be provided by the Sikorsky S-64 Skycrane.

Interstellar Transport

As previously mentioned, the Colony will be initially connected to Earth via Jumpship. The Star Lord class with its six docking collars for Dropships are ideal for this. Eventually, when more Jumpships are available a dedicated Colonial Command Circuit could be

established. This would allow for shipping of materiel and personnel to be done every week instead of every fortnight.

Self-Replication

This is an optional goal for any Colony, but it would lead to a much more rapid increase in colonies, while eliminating costs to and dependence on Earth.

Hypothetical Colonization Timetable:

Colonization Target: Tau Ceti IV, 12.91 LY from Sol

Time to Jump Point: 6 Days

Ships Employed:

Jumpships: 1 Starlord Class Jumpship (6 docking collars) or Earth Modular Jumpships when available.

Dropships: 1 Mule, 1 Leopard, 3 Whales, 1 Modular Colony Dropship (Modified Monarch Class to initially act as Town Hall, Hospital and groundside Manufacturing Centre – See Appendix C)

Day -180 A Dozen satellites are deployed in orbit to observe weather patterns, map the planet and make as many observations as possible, to identify which areas are most likely to suffer flash floods, storms, geological instability and other factors that would influence colony placement. Samples of flora and fauna are taken for analysis on potential impact to human population.

Day 1: Jump to system

Deploy 01 Mule with 70 Orbital Defence platforms (100 tons each) and numerous civilian satellites

Deploy 01 Leopard with defence command crew and orbital systems deployment technicians

Deploy 01 Colony Dropship

Deploy 01 Whale with a Large Unpressurized Modular Shipyard.

Deploy 01 Whale with initial habitats and construction equipment

Deploy 01 Whale with Construction Battalion & small MASH unit

Day 6: Dropships arrive in orbit – deploy all satellites and shipyard. Conduct Landing ceremony, break ground and unload of all materials.

Day 8: 3 Whales and 1 Mule return to Starlord. Leopard remains behind for transport, additional orbital surveys and defence command. Colony Dropship begins to detach its Modular KF Boom and deploys the Colony HPG.

Day 13: Dropships arrive at Starlord and jumps to Sol.

Day 21: Original Dropship group arrives in Earth orbit, and begin loading material in orbit. (Returning crew is kept in quarantine – interaction only to take place in MOP suits.)

Day 23: Launch of 4 Whales, 2 Mules to begin trek to the Starlord.

Day 31: Arrival at jump point, jump to Tau Ceti.

Day 36: Arrive in Tau Ceti IV orbit, drop and unload materials and additional personnel.

Day 38: The procedure is repeated in a continuous circuit until all assigned personnel and initial equipment is delivered.

It's aimed that by the 4th cycle a small city is built and the transporting of colonists can begin. Initial

greenhouse crops should be planted by the beginning of the second run with field crops started by the third run. This would mean detailing some of the construction battalion to farming operations.

In the 5th cycle the initial civilian waves begin.

Initial housing will be modified ship containers, whilst Ingenuity Domes (see appendix A for details) are constructed. While the initial housing can only be done with prefabricated units, everything following that should be done locally. Making concrete locally is fairly easy, as is making the materials needed for building solid foundations. Some materials cannot be locally produced (steel mesh, insulation panels, doors, windows etc) but they are very light and easily transported compared to the more mass intensive building materials.

Colony Types:

There are also three overall models for Colonies, and their equipment and personnel ratios will be tailored to meet these models.

Type 1 Civilian Colony

This Colony is established to ensure the survival of Earth culture, provide resources through colonial trade, and will eventually form its own Nation in the Coalition.

Type 2 Mining Colony

As its name suggests they will be established on NEOs, moons and around gas giants, for the express purpose of resource and even solar energy gathering. (The Directorate suggests 3554 Amun as one such ideal site, a 2 km lump of iron, nickel, cobalt, platinum, and other metals and it contains 30 times as much metal as humans have mined throughout history, it is only the smallest of dozens of known

metallic asteroids.)

Type 3 Colonia

This is a military colony and its establishment will be done by the GDI only to ensure security, with the Directorate only liaising equipment. It will have very little civilian personnel, if any, large amounts of factories dedicated to producing military equipment, shipyards etc. They are established in systems with extremely distant jump points, rich in minerals, and will not necessarily need a habitable biosphere. As they are under GDI jurisdiction, CSN nationhood parameters do not apply.

For a colony to be considered capable of self rule and local autonomy (Independent CSN State Status/Member) they must be able to:

- Honour and maintain the general laws of the CSN
- Be capable of feeding the permanent population
- Be able to sustain a 'Contact' (2005) level technology and industrial/mining base'
- Have at least one small shipyard (or be able to replace it within 1 standard year using local resources)
- Must maintain a local defence force capable of repulsing a Brigade level threat/invader.

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GDI Dropship *Hope for Tomorrow*
Bainsville, Free Worlds League
04 April 3022

David looked around at the other people at the table. Across from him was Daniel, his face perfectly impassive. To his right was Alexander, who had excused himself from the bridge of the Jumpship to partake in the game. The third and fourth persons sat to his left. Vincent was the captain of the Union dropper currently docked opposite to the Seeker, and Sascha had hired the Union and the *Hope* to take her lance to Solaris VII.

And currently, all wanted the small pile of C-Bills on the table before them.

"Two." David said flatly as he discarded a couple cards. His wasn't the greatest of hands, but the pair of sixes could be built into something bigger. He had kept the King, but it was useless – unless he bluffed the others that he had a three-card set in hand.

Vincent tossed him the requested cards, and they were a pair of fours. Instantly, he raised, throwing more cash into the middle of the table.

Daniel and Vincent folded in short order, and Sascha opted to replace only one of the cards in her hand. With a grimace, Alexander folded, leaving only the last two to play. A glance at the clock, and the Jumper Captain calmly informed the two of them that the K-F drive should be finished charged in the next half-hour, and requested that they finish things up.

"All in." David replied, keeping the two pair.

Sascha smiled and pushed all her remaining funds into the pot. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." Her sultry voice indicated that she felt confident in her win.

David tossed his cards onto the table, the two pair quite obvious. "And yours?" he countered with a slight smile of his own. "Anything worth my time?"

Her smile grew into a full on grin. "Full house, 9's over 3's." She eagerly raked in her winnings as the men all displayed various responses to their loss.

"Well, that was fun." Vincent shook his head as he gathered up the cards. "But Helm? Seriously? What is there for you? I landed there once and there was nothing there. At all."

Daniel nodded in agreement. "But they do produce food for export. And my friend here has plans to build a factory down there for farming equipment!" A smirk broke across his face. "He thinks he can make money there by improving agriculture and selling it for profit!"

Vincent laughed at this revelation, while David rolled his eyes in mock annoyance. "Ahh, but you forget the best part of my crazy scheme to make me richer than the House Lords." He leaned over the table, a conspiratorial expression on his face. "You're coming too."

That got both Sascha and Vincent laughing even more as everyone headed for their jump stations.

In Transit, 2 days from Zenith Jumpoint

Helm, Free Worlds League

05 April, 3022

Behind them, the Merchant had deployed the jumpsail and was readying for the next jump towards Solaris. Radio communications with what passed for a spaceport at Helmdown had revealed another Union that was headed in that direction. That Union had lifted off after signing a transport contract with the *Hope*.

The Seeker and Union had hailed each other in passing, delivering pleasantries and well-wishes to each other. Shortly thereafter, the Samurai had called for one last meeting of the heads of Tomb Raider before landing.

The four of them met in the boardroom, where Daniel started the meeting. "I'll make this quick" he started, "Before we land, there are some things I want to reiterate. First of all, we will not be hunting for

the Cache right away. The source material indicates that it is buried under a mountain about 100 kilometers away from Freeport. But that location was bombed during the wars, and we will be landing at Helmdown instead. It was a good thing that our sponsors gave us a satellite with a ground penetrating radar to locate the complex. We will set that up in orbit on our way down, and let it go looking until it finds something."

David was quite surprised and he showed it plainly. "Wait. We have one of those? I didn't know that!"

"Need to know." Alexander pointed out flatly. "Now, because you will be our public face down there, we also want you to be aware of a couple certain individuals to be on the lookout for. The first is ComStar Precentor Rachan. While the material indicates that he is 'rogue', we can not take that at face value. For all we know, he's the local HPG precentor, or he may be ROM, or both. So take care. The second is one Grayson 'Death' Carlyle. While it is unlikely we will encounter him, given that the Gray Death Legion has yet to be formed, bear in mind that it was his mercenary group that uncovered the cache in the original timeline. Fortunately, he's not scheduled to find it for another 5 or 6 years."

James, the Canadian computer programmer nodded. "So, in general, our plan is to set up your factory while the satellite does its looking. Then, we'll go on foot to the indicated location. I think we can say we are using an old Star League assayers report to go looking for minable materials for the factory."

David nodded. Some new information, but everything was as he was casually told over their long trip. "And I assume that the *Hope* will be headed for New Dallas after dropping off her passengers? If they have that core, what do we do?"

"We keep going after the Cache. We would need to get both to compare against each other, although we could shift our efforts more towards recovering materials. Anything else?"

"Nope. Although I suppose I should get back to the Radio, and negotiate for a site for the factory. Or see about buying into the

existing Agromech factory and expanding that."

"Good luck with that."

"Same."

Helmdown

Helm, Free Worlds League

08 April 3022

"NO ONE?!"

David barely contained his indignation as he glared down at the person who was 'supposed' to be in charge of the agromech factory. Supposed being the massively operative word here, as currently the facility was producing exactly zero mechs of any kind. The reason was quite apparent, as the manager of the plant apparently felt that he only needed to work when he was being watched, and this pissed off the Earthman to no end. Such corruption would be out of place in even some of the cesspools back home.

"Yup. Thing is, no one's got any orders, so why bother making them?"

In David's opinion, the bastard just sounded so smug sitting there, getting paid for doing nothing.

"So, there's no way to get a timely response about my offer?"

"Nope. It'll take at least a week, if ComStar moves fast."

And now the man was planning to just sit around on his ass, and not have to deal with Daniel's offer; make sure it never happens, just to keep his plush job.

"You may leave."

Fuming, the executive stormed out of the office, passing by the secretary who was shuffling papers, and finally to Daniel. The Samurai could read the obvious body language as he opened the door for his civilian coworker. As they left the quiet building, the

spymaster fell into step beside David.

"I take it the subtle way didn't work out?"

"No."

"Well, I suppose my men can take care of things on that end."

"Define 'take care of.'"

"Oh, nothing lethal. But understand, we need this cover for our long term goals here. One way or the other."

Understanding that the decision was in his hands, Daniel nodded in agreement. "Do it."

**John Deere Agromech and Tractor Factory
Helm, Free Worlds League
20 April 3022**

A smiling David cut the ceremonial ribbon, opening the newly purchased factory for business. They had a backlog of orders from their trip across the Inner Sphere, and it was time to fill them. And now that the former manager now had a job as a floor sweep and all was right in the world.

**Outside Hilton Head, Terra
25 April, 3022**

Sharilar Mori pushed up the brim of her hat as she looked across the rumbling transport at her mentor. The two of them were the only passengers on the flatbed trailer, reading the latest ROM reports as best they could.

Waterly for the most part, was torn between enjoying getting away from the her office and normal duties - and the Primus' follies she quickly added - and the enjoyment of being out in the sun, which she honestly told herself, she hadn't done much of in the past few months. Her final decision was made when she put down the reports, took off her hat, leaned back and simply soaked up the sunlight that

fell upon her.

Mori shook her head at this display, but felt it was for the better. It had been quite aggravating convincing the Primus to relax Waterly's house arrest even this much. For some reason, the head of the Order felt that she was a flight risk! But she had persevered and gotten permission for the Precentor Deiron to go on a small inspection tour of the farmland around Hilton Head.

In silence, they were driven away from the sight of Hilton Head on one of the farming machines that was returning to the fields after delivering fresh supplies. Sitting beside the driver was a ROM agent tasked with the security of the Precentor; but given that this was Terra, the odds of him being needed were low.

South Carolina was beautiful this time of year and Mori knew that getting the Precentor out into the wider world was going to be good for her stress levels. That she had brought work with her did kind of defeat the purpose, but the assistant resolved to make the best of it.

The silence of the drive was finally broken when Waterly pulled herself upright, replacing her hat. She looked at her protege, and asked if she had finished reading the reports. "Yes, Precentor." Sharilar was already planning on how best to communicate this information back to the Combine.

"Please Shari, out here, I think we can drop the formality."

Mori shook her head with a smile. "Very well, Myo. If you insist."

"Well? The reports?"

"Interesting to say the least. We have long prepared for the return of the Star League, but the actions of this CSN are paradoxical for a hidden Colony of the Hegemony. I see Adept Mulligan's concerns over the flag, but I would object that Motherlode does not fly the Star of Cameron in favor of their own provincial flag."

"Provincial? Interesting. And with basis. It's not like we fly the Star either. They know the League has fallen, so they won't use their

proper flag until the League is reformed."

Mori had to disagree. "You assume that they have designs on restoring the League. And that is part of the confusion. They seem content to stay on Antallos, sending only official diplomats to the OWA, the Dragons and the Suns. Even all their trade with the Inner Sphere takes place at Port Krin!"

Waterly looked down on her protege, slightly disappointed that she couldn't see the same things that she did. It was obvious to her that by limited contact to the Antallos System, this Motherlode and the other worlds in the CSN could better keep their secrets from the prying eyes of the Scavenger Lords. "And yet, the Dragoons. And this mysterious Merchant jumpship." The Precentor tried to provoke the other woman into other lines of thought.

"The Dragoons? It will be interesting to see their actions in the future. Do they skip over working for the Combine and return home, or maintain their cover? Honestly, I would be surprised if they skipped over the Combine. In fact, I predict they will cut their contract short with the Steiners, and take up with the Dragon. That way, if relations between House Ryan and House Kurita sour, they would be in a position to help."

Waterly accepted the idea as being sound. Having a secret force behind enemy lines would be a good thing should such events happen. She would need to think about that more.

In the silence, Sharilar moved the subject on. "As for this Jumpship that is changing names, well, I must point out that such a thing isn't illegal. But certainly suspicious, and you were right to catch that."

Waterly simply nodded and took off her hat to wipe her brow, then set it down to one side. "I shouldn't have had to. Someone else should have caught that, Shari."

She knew that the complaint wasn't directed at her, but Mori felt slightly chastised anyways. "ROM has a theory about where the Jumpship went when it vanished while crossing borders."

"Dead Systems."

"Yes. Although ROM is also concerned that Motherlode has old Star League maps. When we compared our own to modern maps, the cartographers noted a number of worlds that appear on League maps that were burned in the Wars and no longer appear on modern maps. Many of these worlds don't even have an HPG station any more as Blake, in his wisdom, ordered the recovery of them to prevent their perversion by the House Lords."

"That makes plenty of sense. What about their products that they were selling?"

Mori grinned openly at that. "We've confirmed that the company name existed here on Terra before the Coup, but was burned out. That Motherlode has an extension of the John Deere company only made a certain amount of sense, given the need for self-sufficient agriculture."

"And the agromechs themselves? What of they?"

"Not mechs, amazingly enough! But rather, specialized groundcars, devoted to the processes of agriculture. They are *less* advanced than any agromech and sold very cheaply for it."

Waterly pondered this. Why would the Star League distribute backwards facing technology? That made no sense.

"In addition," Mori kept going "this group of probable Motherlodgers landed on Helm earlier this month, where, after some small troubles, purchased and re-branded the agromech factory there."

"Helm?" Waterly had never heard of that world before.

"It's in the Free World League, near the Loran border. Population of about 15 million, and exports food stuffs." Mori read the dry report that was attached somewhere near the back. "Precentor... Theoden? No, that can't be right. Someone smudged the writing there, a new edit it seems. Precentor Theo, successor to Halden."

"Why there?" Waterly wondered aloud.

"The factory seems like the most obvious answer, but that's too obvious. Certainly there could have been easier or more lucrative opportunities..."

"There is something else there." Waterly's voice was certain and Sharilar had to agree. "But what?"

"I already ordered an agent inserted into the factory to help us gain that information."

"Good, good. Anything else?"

"Actually, yes. Back to those specialized groundcars that they were selling. ROM acquired some on Sian for analysis. We did examinations here on Terra. Nothing out of the ordinary. The technology is practically pre-spaceflight in its simplicity, the materials commonly available on almost any world. The most complex things appear to be either the rubber used in the tires, or the wiring involved."

"So?" Waterly was confused. How was that important?

"Well, ROM decided that they weren't much of a threat, so released them."

Waterly gave her protege a confused look.

Mori responded with a wide smile, and patted the tractor-trailer they were riding in. "This is one of them."

Office of the Primus
Hilton Head, Terra
26 April, 3022

Julius blinked at the small message in front of him, then started to laugh at the absurdity of it. The Precentor Dieron was taking the day off to recover from the sunburns acquired during her tour yesterday. Apparently she forgot the sunscreen and other precautions.

He quickly penned a note to wish her well in her recovery, fighting hard to keep his humor out of his writing.

Non Standard Jumpoint

New Dallas System

31 May 3022

The *Hope For Tomorrow* popped into existence 20 degrees below the plane of the ecliptic, having only seconds ago been in a populated system. She had no dropships attached, but hopefully that would soon change.

On the bridge of the Merchant, Alexander made sure his ship was secure, then ordered a transmission sent in-system, using GDI codes, asking for an update. Then he, and his crew settled into the waiting game.

97 Kilometers from the former city of Freeport

Helm, Free Worlds League

01 June 3022

"Holy shit, those doors are huge."

"Well, they'd have to be. Moving massive amounts of equipment in and out would require a large point of interest."

The satellite had been deployed in high orbit weeks ago, and slowly scanned the planet looking for the tell-tale artificial marks of an underground facility. In addition, Tomb Raider had used their Factory cover to check in with the local Assayers office and check for any mines in the predicted area. The theory was that they could cover any movement to and from the cache as being from a mine in the area that was getting resources for the Factory itself.

While that was happening, a back office in the Factory was converted into a computer center, ready to be the off-site backup for the Cache. Ideally, the computers, with their information, would be returned to Antallos while Tomb Raider stayed on station for the full year.

But when the Cache was found, it wasn't due to any sort of advanced technology. It was the railroad. Helm, for her population of farmers, had a heavy duty rail system installed to move the grain products from the various cities and towns to the Spaceport, where it would be loaded into dropships and exported.

One leg of the rail system went into the mountains, a heavy gauge that could take massive loads. It was easy to miss from the ground, but in the air, the path was plain as day. And it led straight to the front door of the Cache.

Daniel Morris stood before the Helm Cache, their final objective. "Get it open." he ordered. "And lets see what we have."

April 18th, 3022
Fort Irwin, California

Major Staedele steered his Mech through another street of the mock city that formed the MOUT course, observing the surroundings, including the platoon of candidates for the infantry that were supporting him in this live-fire exercise. A mock-up tank appeared at the end of the road, just to be hit by a low-powered PPC blast before the candidates surged forward to engage "enemy infantry". From his lofty (and, for a change, lonely) position, the Major could see that they were doing their job fine.

The candidates advanced at a steady pace, employing suppressive fire and rooting out enemy positions with grenade-launchers and rockets while *Altes Eisen* walked down the street behind them, firing occasionally at more hardened positions pointed out by the infantry. Doing that came almost automatically to the Major, giving him time to fully assess the rookies. 'They're doing not half bad. Sure, they lack a bit of the fluidity and almost instinctual teamwork I known from Marc and his boys, but that's going to come in time. They're scrubs, but they're good scrubs.'

Reaching the end of the street, Staedele went on the radio. "Fire Element One to Command, we reached Nav Gamma. Everything going as planned, light enemy resistance. I suffered minimal damage from enemy rocket teams. Over."

"Good going, One," the voice of Nedeljko responded. Captain Nedeljko had been placed in overall command for the exercise, with the Major bumped down to a simple MechWarrior. "Advance towards Nav Delta and link up with the other Fire Elements for the final phase. Over."

"Acknowledged, Command. Any news about the others?"

"Fire Element Three had a few problems, but nothing serious. Support One is doing great and..."

"Abort! Abort! Abort!" the panicked voice of MW Miller interrupted

them. "Medic to Element Four, we got a blue-on blue!"

Staedele climbed out of the Mech and steadily walked towards the small gathering of candidates. The crowd parted to let him through. At the center of the commotion, one man was laying on the ground, a medic working on him, while Johnson, Miller and another candidate with one of the XM8s they had issued for the exercise stood next to them.

"Okay, what the hell just happened?"

It was Johnson who answered him. "Candidate Wilson here saw movement through the windows of the building over there", he pointed at the building in question, "and opened fire without checking his target. He hit candidate Mendez, whose squad was clearing the building at the time."

The candidate, Wilson, visibly winced at the assessment. Fixating him with a cold glare, the Major flatly stated: "We're going to talk about this later." It had all the sound of a death sentence.

Walking over to the medic and candidate Mendez, he asked how Mendez was doing. To his surprise, the private answered even before the medic. "No worry, Sir, it's just a scratch." That wondered the Major. He looked at the medic.

"He's right, sir. The bullet hit him in the shoulder, but the vest took the worst of it. As far as I can see it barely penetrated through the soft part of the armor and didn't have enough energy left to do more than barely penetrate his skin. I already pulled the bullet out and as far as I can see, he's gonna get away with patches and a nasty bruise. Hell, were this a real combat situation, he'd still be perfectly combat capable." That wondered the Major. Normally, he wouldn't expect the body armor of the Cav, let alone the somewhat weaker soft parts of it, to work that well. The medic continued: "Still, I'd like to take him to the infirmary and have the doc check him thoroughly."

Mendez answered in distress: "Aww, you gotta be kidding me! I'm gonna miss the football game!" At this, they all three laughed. "Sorry,

Mendez. Doctors orders", the medic quipped with barely restrained laughter.

That taken care of, the Major turned to the crowd. "You heard them, he's gonna be alright. Mr. Wilson, be so good and accompany candidate Mendez to the infirmary, we will talk about this later. The rest of you goes back into their position, the exercise gets continued."

On his way back to the Warhammer, Major Staedele was pondering the implications of what had just happened and resolved to do some research.

April 21st, 3022
Fort Irwin, California

"Ladies and Gentlemen, with your signature of the contracts, you are now officially enlisted personnel of the Buron Cavalry mercenary company. Each of you passed through the training courses with flying colors. Each of you earned his or her position in our unit.

And as a welcome gift, each of you has a week of leave, beginning tomorrow. Oh, and the rest of today is free time, too. Now have fun, people. That's an order! Dismissed!"

The entire crowd began cheering and laughing on that cue, starting the serious business of celebrating their new jobs, with the majority of them heading away on a straight course to the next pub. Major Staedele couldn't but grin at their enthusiasm.

"Nice speech," his XO quipped at him. "One week of leave? You sure pamper them."

"Thanks, Ned. And I think they deserve it. It's not like they will have that much free time once we get deployed back to Antallos. You heard?"

"Of course. Early next year, right? So, what are we going to do till then?"

The last part was said in a more serious manner.

"Way to ruin the mood, Ned. What we have on the list until then are three things. First, we're going to have to do something about those new rifles. And then, we'll continue playing OPFOR and doing side-jobs. But that can wait until tomorrow. Care for a drink?"

"You pay."

April 22nd, 3022

Fort Irwin, California

After a short knock on the door, Captain Johnson entered the Major's office. Being signalled, he sat down and began without any preamble.

"To make it short, those 5.56ers are useless."

Raising an eyebrow at the blunt statement, Major Staedele signalled Johnson to continue.

"With the normal rounds, we can barely get through the softer portions of our body armor and the chest area stops them completely. I fired three bursts in rapid succession into one of the spare vests and not one bullet got through.

The AP ammo they gave us is barely better. It still doesn't get through the chest portion or our helmets with any kind of reliability. Same test, out of nine bullets, two penetrated partially, one completely. The limb protection is still able to prevent major injury almost half the time, too.

Using the hotloaded AP we brewed together in the armory and the longest barrel available for the XM8, we got pretty reliably through the soft portions and managed to get through the chest portion roughly half the time. But that stuff is awful. We fired just two magazines of it, yet it degraded the barrel something fierce, caused a jam and the recoil is harsh. The gun isn't built to take that kind of abuse.

Did you contact the guys from H&K about it?"

"In fact, I did, Marc. They say that they found out a short time ago, too. Apparently, it's another one of those things nobody was thinking about for a good, long time. No wonder, they were living here under a paradigm in which body armor could mostly stop pistol rounds for the last few decades."

Staedele shook his head in disgust. It seemed like nobody had actually asked why full-calibre battle rifles were standard equipment for most IS infantry. He had contacted a few Army people on the base after the friendly fire incident a couple days ago and the guys had been almost shocked at seeing an assault rifle round rendered completely ineffective by the less protective part of a set of body armor much like the ones commonly used by infantry units across the Inner Sphere. He continued.

"It looks like they'll either switch calibres to some intermediate calibre or even go back to full size rifle rounds then. The latter isn't much of an option for our new rifles, though. The former is, but will take a lot of time for them to even begin implementing. Any ideas what we could do until then, Marc?"

"In fact, I do. The hotloaded rounds are the best bet we have. We need barrels manufactured to IS standards in terms of toughness. That'll take months for any company to set up a full production line. But we don't need one. We have the materials and I can get the guys in the armory going at it as soon as you give the order. That and a few minor mods to enhance reliability and ease the recoil should take care of the worst of the problems with the XM8s. Cardan and the other boys from the armory have already a few ideas. The rifles will get a bit heavier due to it and we'll have to standardise barrel length, though." He shrugged his shoulders. "I guess it falls on your shoulders to tell that to H&K. I wonder how they'll react. Anything else?"

"Yes, Marc, there is something else. We got ourselves a nice job. Apparently, things are cooling down in Afghanistan and Pakistan. After Mecca got attacked during the invasion, there has been a gradual reduction of the problems they had in that area. They're now planning a small negotiation summit between the two governments

and the Taliban. Thing is, the rebels don't exactly trust either the US or those two governments, so someone made the compromise to hire our infantry to do security at the conference. They pay rather good, especially as it is feared that a few more radical elements of the Taliban could still try attacking the thing. Not all of them are happy about this whole peace thing."

"Why us? Aren't there enough PMCs around, like those Blackwater guys? I bet they'd like this kind of job and all the publicity."

"Oh yes, but they have already worked with the local US forces and the afghani government and they don't exactly enjoy much popularity down there with either side. So they were looking for some mercs that were both good enough and a-political enough. Heh, can't wait to see the reaction of Mr. Prince about this little thing, Blackwater tried securing that contract hard. Serves the bastard right for the shit they tried pulling with us after Reykjavik."

"What happened there anyway that they were inclined to finance a smear campaign against us? You never told us the details."

"Mostly because it's really not that important. After the Accords were signed, there was a small, informal meeting of several big PMC CEOs, commanders and so on and somebody had the idea of inviting me. Well, I guess it was chemistry. I couldn't really stand the guy directly when I met him at that conference. Too much arrogance and blind optimism. What I read about these hacks and their activities before our arrival didn't exactly impress me either. And then he began, in front of the entire crowd, to preach about how they'd corner the Merc market in the Inner Sphere and how they were on a mission to promote Earth's and the US' interests. The word crusade didn't really fall, but oh boy, was it implied in the religious rethorics he mixed into his little speech."

"And then?", Johnson asked with disbelief on his face.

"Well, he saw me facepalming at the stupidity and called me on it. That was when I explained to him that he was completely delusional with that grand dream of his. Let's face it: Blackwater is the biggest PMC on this rock and even though they are trying to get some heavy

combat units up to spec at the moment, most battalion-sized merc details in the IS have more heavy firepower than them.

One or two decent regiments of IS mercs would be able to take on all the professional PMCs on this planet at the same time. Make it units from the Dragoons, the Highlanders, the Big Mac or similar and they'd slaughter the bunch. Before our arrival, most of them were glorified peace-keepers and rent-a-cops. They were mostly fighting against relatively small guerilla forces that employed antiquated small arms and IEDs. And, on top, the PMCs enjoyed support from the regular militaries if things got sticky. They're not used to doing full scale open warfare.

Well, Mr. Prince didn't like that and the argument grew a bit heated. The man seems to be more than a bit prejudiced against the IS and started throwing insults and I ended up giving him a share of my thoughts about some of the less glamorous things in the short history of his corporation as well as my personal stance about tying oneself to a specific political cause. He answered the latter with more insults and sneering and apparently took the former rather personal. And the rest is history."

"Yeah, history." Johnson sneered. "First his little interviews full of jabs at us and then he is one of the biggest investors into those parts of the political landscape that would still prefer to see us locked up and our gear seized. Heh, the latter one backfired pretty nicely when a few people found out and put the information on the internet. The press conference afterwards was totally worth watching, just to see the fucker squirm."

"That is was, Marc, that it was. Anyway, I don't think that this is over just yet. But enough of that. You have one week to give me a good organisation for our infantry with all the new faces incorporated. After that, you're off to Pakistan. Any ideas already?"

"Yeah. Two companies with four platoons each. Three combat and one weapons platoon plus an independent command squad. The sniper and mortar teams as well as a few SRM teams will either be attached ad hoc or operate independently. It will take a few days to sort out the officers and NCOs and to promote the best of the

candidates, but a week is plenty."

"Good. That's all for today then. I still have some paperwork left, and after that, I have to go and pick up Esther from school. You?"

Jonson answered with a big grin. "I'll make myself a quiet and relaxing evening, always thinking about you working hard to keep this unit running."

"Bastard."

Vatican II, president's teacher

February 28, 2007/3022

Papal Office

Apostolic Palace, Vatican City

Earth, Grantville Cluster

Benedict XVI and Cardinal Levada had met in the papal office again to discuss progress on Antallos and Levada was in the middle of his presentation

"We get to see every bit of information falling in the hands of the Nuntius of Antallos and my men, Holy Father. There is no evidence for a further Vaticanum, but the circumstances still do not allow us to establish contact with an Inner Sphere priest of the churches of Terra or New Avalon. It would give away too much. What we do know are the names of the local 'popes'; Leo XXVII of Terra and John Paul IX of New Avalon." Levada reported soberly.

"John Paul?" Benedict echoed incredulously. At Levada's affirming nod, the leader of the Catholic Church pinched the bridge of his nose, in an effort to stave off a growing headache, before he said, "I'm just glad my old friend died before he had to see this. Nonetheless. The Draconis Combine ambassadors already know 'Motherlode' is Earth, and as far as I remember, Jack Ryan is a good Catholic who was taught by Jesuits." Levada nodded, to which the Pope reached for the intercom skillfully integrated into his ancient desk.

When a voice answered, Benedict said, "I want to speak to the Jesuit Superior General. Make an appointment."

Turning back Father Levada, the Bishop of Rome asked "What about the situation in Antallos? How is the population to our efforts?"

"Surprisingly, very well. It is heartening, your Holiness, were it not also sad just how so long they have been ignored. The GDI officers, they fear, but to our missionaries they confess their deepest fears and hopes for the future. For so long they felt they were denied the grace of God. It is as if slowly they are coming to the realization they are

worthy of being treated like human beings again."

Pope Benedict XVI looked grim. "Even Marx, that benighted soul, managed to approach the truth. *'Religion is the opiate of the masses, the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.'* It is to God that the downtrodden man cries for justice, not to the nobles that would rather pretend they not exist."

'God, in his infinite mercy, has answered.' The Muslims were reported to be preparing their hajj, and he felt he had the opposite responsibility. The Church must look to the outside for its most holy and worthy burden. He took a deep breath. "Our work has just begun. What else, my child?"

"As to be expected, forays by GDI humanitarian initiatives would be under great scrutiny. However, it is a point of interest that some of the watchers seem dedicated to following around priests and other religious figures. Pater Iglesias has mentioned several suspect individuals visiting the site for his new Church. These same individuals have been sighted at the improvised primary schools where GDI carries out its directive, that most of the populace must be able to read or write. Tellingly, these same individuals seem uninterested in the military hardware and salvage that takes up much of GDI concerns. They have been asking, if discreetly, about GDI's religious and educational stance."

"That is interesting. You have a suspicion?"

"It is unsupported, but like Father Iglesias I suspect they might belong to the Order Militant."

"How can you be certain they are not agents of ROM?" Here the Pope frowned slightly. While he distrusted the sourcebooks, there was enough evidence to support the idea of Comstar deliberately destroying houses of learning. The letters from Antallos were clear in that the few Comstar-sponsored schools were woefully inadequate and flat-out teaching false scientific theories.

"They did not behave like that infant organization." was the reply, with a slight smile. At little more than two hundred years old,

Comstar's religious cloak was freshly-spun indeed. The Jesuits were closer to four hundred and seventy years in experience. They were also recovering from a relatively recent suppression by their own Church, for having accumulated so much temporal influence. "They are literate and dedicated, surprising in menial laborers. The most telling sign is a faint facial twitch whenever someone speaks of 'the Blessed Blake'."

The Pope wondered if sainthood was retro canonical in the new universe. There would surely be new saints in the thousand years between their histories. Surely the old Terran Church would begrudge having been pushed aside in the homeworld of humanity by little more than techno-sorcery. "Let us discuss Jerome Blake's canonization later. So, you believe they are Jesuits? Has Pater Iglesias attempted contact?"

"Of course not, your Holiness. He begs instruction from either you or the Superior General."

Changing the topic again, he nodded. "So, how can we best help the people in the Sphere?"

"We identified two major topics, Holy Father. Shipping and housing. Coalition traders already signed a lot of contracts about selling simple tractors, plows and other things to help getting agriculture in the Outworld Alliance away from manual work and horses. The only thing missing to deliver is transport capacity. This fits well to the situation the books mention; Billions of people even in the successor States being dependent on imported food. Even if we accept a tenth of this as the truth, Inner Sphere agriculture needs to be improved to free up shipping capacity and raise the overall standard of living." Benedict made a note and nodded, signaling Levada to move on. "As for housing, there are a few intriguing concepts. American Ingenuity Domes offers a relatively cheap, nearly ragnarok proofed building we can make absolutely maintenance free by adding a few independent power sources and other things to make the poor independent from their lords. Then there are Concrete Canvas shelters and other maintenance free prefabricated houses."

"I gather they do not mass produce these yet?"

"No."

"We will change the housing situation." he looked up to the ceiling and then faced Levada again. "The Pontifical Academy of Sciences will invite the engineers of these companies. We will prepare a Conclave of scientists and engineers interested in helping the people out there, catholic or not. The Knights of Malta will get support with their Armor project, too. The Swiss Guard will evaluate participating in this GDI research."

"We should consider the guard buying initiative standard equipment only from now on."

"Your rationale being?"

"Initiative equipment will be the equipment with the best Research funds to combine Battletech, Star League and Earth technology and standards as well as the one with the biggest production runs."

"Ah, yes. Mass production. It is as essential as always." the pope nodded. "We will apply mass production to housing, to medical equipment and a lot more things than weapons. We will change life in the sphere. And we will change it to the better for the people neglected by the warlords reigning the stars now." At this moment, Benedict did not look as if he would be eighty the month after the next. Grim determination was seen on his face as he went on.

"Charity income is increasing by an average 15% every year since the economic boom started, but it still is not enough to help the spheroids. I ordered to check our art collection, real estate and other assets. A Michelangelo is worthless compared to a single soul. We will spend at least a billion Euros on this."

Which would result in at least 1.1 billion Dollars, Levada thought, impressed.

"We will start another Renaissance once the secret is out. You are dismissed."

Levada bowed and left the room while chills ran down his spine. This would give people something to think about.

The next afternoon, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the eighty-year old Father-General of the Jesuits, entered the Holy Office and bowed. "Holy Father."

Benedict put away a notebook. He had just ended a meeting with the director of the Vatican Observatory, who had not given him good news. Even with contemporary technology, there were literally hundreds of stars detected a single jump away from Earth, each of them having a potential solar system or just a few asteroids and an Oort Cloud of its own. While it was a striking idea to hide a copy of the secret archives out there, finding it would be all but impossible. This was the whole point of hiding it there, after all. He looked up. "Superior General. As far as I know, President Jack Ryan was taught in Boston by your men. Is that correct?"

"This is correct, Holy Father."

"Good. Let one of your men have a talk with Ryan. We need to establish contact with the Church out in the Sphere and therefore to release the cover. The Combine ambassadors know it anyway and I see no reason to give them an advantage in strategic intelligence."

"Yes, Holy Father. I would suggest using his old friend and Ph.D. advisor Father Riley from Georgetown University."

"Good. Use the contact you expect the best reaction from."

"As you command."

"I heard about Spheroid Jesuits?"

"Pater Iglesias has a suspicion. We do not know who amongst them belongs to which Church."

"Hand them this and watch their reactions. We will send six of them

to the Nuntius. That should be enough." Benedict ordered before he placed a letter on the table.

Kolvenbach opened it and found a copy of the vows of the Jesuits, written in Ancient Greek and stamped by a wax impression of the Ring of the Fisherman. Even he, who had seen the pope and his antecessor lots of times over the last decades, could not help but shiver and suppress making the sign of the cross as he saw the holy seal.

Any Jesuit farther away from Rome could not help but be identified by this. He wondered what orders his brothers would get...

"We cannot allow Comstar to do with humanity what the people have accused us of doing. Their abuse of God's name simply cannot be tolerated." This last order, delivered in a flat tone, sent chills down Kolvenbach's spine...

As the door closed behind Kolvenbach, Benedict picked up another paper and studied a report about education systems in the Sphere and how much better Earth education was – at least if you compared the first world with a periphery hole like Antallos.

His thoughts wandered off a bit. Education would be the key. It was... interesting to see how bad Comstar had been in keeping up their cover if it came to education. Those books said Comstar would split inside the next fifty years. He would have preferred to have more time, but sometimes even the church had to rush things. The best thing about this was that – according to the books – the split would be easy to accomplish. A periphery world coming from nowhere, sending teachers and showing how easy it was to implement a better school system than Comstar.

Well. The only book he would take close to literal was the original version of the bible in Greek and Aramaic. But if even a tenth of this was true, he would show the sphere how the quill was mightier than the sword.

A young Chilean priest had found this and it had been on the roman desk of the congregation not even a week afterward. The plan was obvious in hindsight, very easy and promptly got full attention. But best of all, it was more or less a by-product of their godly mission.

Build a better school system than Comstar. Let Comstar find it out – which would be inevitable anyway. Give the moderate forces and those really believing in "Blake's" mission something to think about. Let them ask for resources and force the fanatics of Word of Blake to choose between their mission and their cover story. Flank it by requesting information about the "blessed" Blake and rub the doubts in slowly, but steadily. Well, if you could call a mere few decades "slow..."

The White House
Washington DC
Earth, Grantville Cluster
March 10th, 2007/3022

Jack Ryan was being briefed about the hajj fleet as the door opened and his secretary peeked into the room. "Mr. Preside-"

"Ellen!"

"Sorry, Jack. Excuse the interruption, but Father Riley is on the phone saying he has to speak to you personally."

"Father Riley? That's not exactly standard procedure..."

"No, it isn't. Just this morning, we got a letter from the Nuncio saying he would be pleased if you could free up a few minutes for Father Riley. I checked the schedule, and you have half an hour free today."

"Did he mention the reason for his call?"

"No. He only said that it's of 'interstellar importance'."

"Interstellar?" He raised an eyebrow "A simple 'global' isn't enough nowadays, is it? Okay, tell him I'll see him."

A few hours later, Father Timothy Riley, S.J. stepped in, wearing his formal uniform and greeted the POTUS with a simple, "Hi, Jack."

"Hi, Father. The Nuncio told me you wanted to speak me."

"Yes, I imagine you're very busy at the moment..."

"Definitely."

"Jack, I don't think you quite realize yet that soon, the Church will be just as busy, if not more so than any governmental agency. There are two other Popes and an atheist's understanding of the Holy Mother Church in space. There are no tanks involved, true, but Rome is preparing to strike out into the Sphere. God did not send us here to hide behind a nuclear shield and let the people of the Sphere suffer under the Middle Ages writ large! Which," he smiled dryly, "is the reason for my visit. We have reason to believe the Order Militant still exists out there, and the Holy Father wants to make contact. With all those Draconis Combine spies doing research in The Hague, the secret is out as soon as they reach Antallos. This is inevitable, but bad. The only thing worse is that it will give them an advantage in strategic intelligence."

"True. My intelligence services have been debating what to do about it."

"Rome has decided not to accept this disadvantage lying down. In case you haven't heard, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is growing massively and the Orders are getting more and more support, too. You have read the source 'books', I guess. They have given many a Dominican a nervous breakdown and the agency they call ROM..." he shook his head. "Well, we have to assume they're capable. But they hide behind religion, and thus are blasphemy. The Malleus Maleficarum isn't exactly the perfect answer, but we cannot allow the abuse of a Blessing."

"Rome is unleashing the... Inquisition?" Jack asked incredulously, momentarily forgetting his professionalism.

"The Orders spent more than *double* the time of ROM learning their craft and building their mystiques in ever-changing societies; for all that ROM has modeled itself on them, it's built its traditions over the space of a mere two centuries, and for the main part, its successes have come from their monopoly on technologies like interstellar

communications. I doubt those advantages have accustomed them to exertion, diligence or adversity." Riley smiled for a moment, but the expression didn't quite reach his eyes. "The Holy Father is going to allow the Orders to... test whether such spoiled children are worthy of the mantle they covet. However, that is *not* the main thing I have been ordered to ask of you."

"So, what does Rome want?"

"We want the Coalition to stop concealing the truth about Earth. Earth cannot hide forever; there is no use in giving the Combine that much of an advantage and we might be able to tap into the ancient knowledge of the Order Militant."

"You want to suborn some of their spies?"

"Yes. With a bit of luck, they will know where they hid the archives."

"Hid the -?"

"Oh, Jack, and you were such a good student. Do you really think the mid to late 3rd millennium Church would neglect the chance to hide the archives off world? The observatory is just now searching for a few dozen stars with nice, hidden asteroids to do this."

"Finding this cache of knowledge would be priceless, indeed." Jack Ryan answered, his head spinning at the prospect.

"Yes, but to do this we need to endanger the secret. And we *will* do it anyway, so it would be much better if the CSN decided to drop the cloak of secrecy. Many heads of state are being asked the same thing today, but you bringing it into the assembly would give it extra strength."

April 21st, 3022
Fort Irwin, California

"Ladies and Gentlemen, with your signature of the contracts, you are now officially enlisted personnel of the Buron Cavalry mercenary company. Each of you passed through the training courses with flying colors. Each of you earned his or her position in our unit.

And as a welcome gift, each of you has a week of leave, beginning tomorrow. Oh, and the rest of today is free time, too. Now have fun, people. That's an order! Dismissed!"

The entire crowd began cheering and laughing on that cue, starting the serious business of celebrating their new jobs, with the majority of them heading away on a straight course to the next pub. Major Staedele couldn't but grin at their enthusiasm.

One of those headed not for the pub, but for the barracks, was a wiry redhead known to many as 'Alleycat', but known on his official records as Thomas O'Malley.

He wasn't alone, either. Three others separated from the mob heading to get drunk, and jogged a bit to catch up with the long-legged Earther. "Tom, you really need to get those legs shortened," one of them joked, a vaguely Asian woman that looked like she would blow away in a stiff breeze.

O'Malley's stride slowed but didn't stop, letting those following him catch up. "No, you need yours extended," he retorted, using the traditional refrain to the woman who served as his gun's driver during the later stages of training.

"Seriously, you got any plans for that week we just got, Tom?" she asked once she had caught up.

"Yeah, I was planning on hitting Vegas. Coupla hours east of here. Why, you wanna see how fast you can blow your cash, Mari?"

Mariko Cho snorted. "Not hardly. I've been to some of the gambling houses in the Magistracy. I know how the game is played, I don't intend to lose."

The second person, a thin weasel of a man from some unknown world in the Periphery going by the nickname of 'Mongoose' or 'Fifty-Two', depending on who was asked, laughed. "Yeah, but I hear the Major didn't intend to get hijacked by Vorass, either. Look how well *that* worked out! Anyway, O'Malley, you got space for a few more? I'd like to check this place out, but I ain't stupid to go to terra incognita without someone who knows their way around the place, especially after those assholes from a few years back attacked the kids." While none of the new recruits were around at that time, the grapevine had spread the word of what happened in the first few months of the Cav's presence on Earth, making it a kind of 'open secret' among members new and old.

"Sure, the more the merrier." O'Malley glanced over his shoulder to the last of the three, a generally indistinguishable young man with a bit of a weight control issue. "What about you, Jeff? You want in?"

"Yeah, sure. If nothing else, you do seem to know where the action is. Damned if that scuffle last week wasn't fun."

O'Malley groaned at the memory of the bar fight to which Jeff Williams referred. "Right... Anyway, since you guys are coming along, I'd recommend going easy on the sauce tonight. I'm going to be making arrangements for a ride to Barstow-Daggett airport, and from there a flight out to Vegas leaving in the morning. If you're too soused to get up and get moving, you're shit out of luck. Comprene? And for God's sake, hit the PX and pick up some civvie clothing. There's no way in hell you're going to go around town in Cav uniform, at least if you want to go with me. And make them nice clothes. Not necessarily a full-out tux or anything like that, but T-shirt and jeans is tourist gear."

Next morning

A little worse for the wear, the three ISers piled into a Chevy

Suburban after throwing a suitcase each in the back, and headed for the main base exit.

"Aaaand awaaaay we go!" exclaimed an all too chipper - at least to the partly hung-over Spheroids - O'Malley once they cleared the gate. "Oh, yeah, can't forget this." He takes a CD out of an unlabeled case and pops it into the Suburban's CD player. After the player spun up, Aerosmith's "Sweet Emotion" started playing.

"Why that?" the more than slightly wasted woman asked.

"Tradition."

16:30, April 28th, 3022
Lt. Hinze's office

The four Cav artillery people stood at perfect attention before Lt. Hinze, each sporting multiple bruises of one sort or another, O'Malley's including a rather noticeable shiner.

"Before I begin, this is not a formal inquiry. Whatever happened in Vegas didn't make the police reports." He pushed out of his seat, and started pacing behind his desk, after pushing the office chair back under it. "That said, *what the hell did you do that got the cops so riled?* I have rumors of a bar riot, half a dozen assault and battery charges that could have been filed if the assaultees had decided to press the case, and multiple reports of behavior unbecoming a member of the Cav. I'm pretty sure that if you had actually been caught, the Vegas police would be wanting your heads. *And they would get them.* You may think that being the hot-shit arty team during workups gives you some leeway." The Lieutenant stops his pacing, and turns to face the four. "It. Does. Not. What do you have to say for yourself?"

As the senior member of the group, O'Malley replied for the four, "No excuse, Sir," not knowing of any way he could possibly mitigate the reports of wild nights prior to hastily fleeing Las Vegas - most of which he knew to be accurate, in general.

"No shit, O'Malley." After a moment's pause, Hinze continued. "Effective eighteen hundred hours today, you four are confined to the

barracks for a month, with the exception of duty requirements and meals. Those 'duty requirements' will also, from time to time, include shit details as I see fit. Lacking official complaints from the locals, without invoking Major Staedele that's the most *formal* punishment I can give you. But don't think that's the worst you'll get from me," he growled in conclusion. "With your remaining free time, hit the PX and invest in several extra toothbrushes. You'll need them. Cho, Williams and Cole, you are dismissed, and close the door behind you. O'Malley, you stay."

Privates Cho, Williams, and Cole turned about to depart, the last out closing the door behind them.

"Okay, spill it. From them I expect that kind of shit, they're just barely out of childhood. You, on the other hand, have been around long enough that you should know better. And don't give me that 'stays in Vegas' crap, or you can tell both me and the Major in a formal inquiry." Hinze pulled out his chair, and sat down in it. "I'm sure the Major will ask me anyway, even with my handling this 'in-house', as it were, so I want the whole story, without the bullshit."

"Yessir. For the most part, there wasn't any problems, save an inebriated gambler or two thinking they could take liberties with Private Cho, and her refusing them a bit more forcefully than was justified. One of them won't be having children any time soon, I think, though in her defense he was getting physical with her.

"On the last day, though, we decided to go out with a bang, figuratively speaking. We were doing fine, until we apparently ran into some group convention of Blackwater people. One started getting fresh with Private Cho, and in the course of defending her honor, such as it is, Williams let slip that we were with the Cav. It went downhill from there. There were some heated exchanges, when another of them insulted Cole's mother. He played it cool at first, but he got out his deck of cards, at which point the rest of us knew we were in trouble. One insult too many was given, and Cole used his 'Fifty-Two Pickup' routine to sucker-punch the guy. The others reacted unkindly towards that, and in the course of defending ourselves a friend of mine from the 11th called out to the other Blackhorse," referring to the nickname for the 11th Armored Cavalry

Regiment, "troopers for support. After a few more swings in both directions while bystanders were getting tangled up in the fight, I decided it was time to round up the rest of the team and beat feet. We got out just as the police were starting to arrive, and managed to slip away with the rest of the crowd trying to get away from the fighting. I guess the Blackwater people got so hammered that they were embarrassed to admit that they'd had their asses handed to them by supposed weak pussies. After that, we grabbed the next flight out of town, and you apparently heard the rest of the story, or else we'd not be here right now."

Hinze nodded. "That wasn't quite as bad as the rumors had lead me to believe, but still not acceptable behavior for a member of Buron Cav. That said, as it didn't result in the law getting involved, this won't be escalated to the Major. I do have one last question, though, about a rumor specifically involving you. This rumor I heard hinted at something involving you, a pair of rubber pants, two pounds of spaghetti noodles, an inflatable sheep, and ten feet of rope. Please tell me that sounded better in context."

O'Malley took a moment to try to recall some more of the more blurry partial memories of his time off base. "I can't say that it does, Sir. At least for what I can recall of the week in Vegas."

"Right. If I hear reports of such nature again, regarding you and/or your companions, pray to whatever deity or deities you hold dear that the Major gets to you before I do. Although not the worst of stories I've heard - yours not referring to actual farm animals or bodily wastes, for starters - I still heard too much.

"Oh, and one last thing. If you breathe a word of this to your cohorts or I hear of a repeat of this incident I *will* bring the world down on your head, but... nice job on beating the shit out of those Blackwater fucks. While the decision to fight them was not the most rational of choices, I can't fault your team for the thoroughness with which you showed them the terrible depth of their mistake. Just don't do it again. Now get out of here."

The Earther promptly turned about to remove himself from Lt. Hinze's office, leaving as fast as protocol allowed.

ANOTHER lost story post being posted late! Argh!

FOB Tripoli

Sea of Despair

Antallos

30 December 3022

"Welcome to FOB Tripoli," Bob said as he and the man known as 'Remus Lupin' hopped out of Bob's company's flat bed truck.

"Fob Tripoli?" Remus repeated inquisitively to his nominal boss as he looked around. The GDI had built a new base right in the middle of the desert not far from Port Krin. Despite being only a few months old, it already looked weather worn from the wind and sand. The base was centered on and around a prominent rocky peak that poked up above the desert sand. The GDI had built some kind of building on top of it with a large set of antennae, radio dishes, and a small blimp hovering on a line above it. Surrounding it was another set of buildings at the base and camouflaged fighting positions. It had even had its own separate fence line and practically formed a base within a base.

It was an odd setup, and immediately drew Remus'... curiosity.

"'FOB' stands for 'Forward Opera Base' or something like that," Bob told him. He may have been a greedy sack of scum, but he was a fount of information to Remus. "'Tripoli' is the name of some historical victory against pirates or something. Does it matter?"

"Not really, I guess," Remus replied. "But what are we doing here? I thought we were going to go dig up mechs."

"Right, this is your first outing on one of these digs," Bob said, nodding. "Okay, these GDI dicks got all these rules and regulations, right? So anyway, they like to run all the dig teams through a central checkpoint to make sure everyone's on the up and up. It's like they don't trust us not to nick stuff. Can you believe that?"

Actually, Remus could, but decided it would be impolitic to say so.

So instead of answering, he opted to look around some more. In the area they parked in, he noted that several trucks and escorting mercs from various rival salvage operations were also present on the field.

"They run everyone through here?" Remus asked.

"Yeah," Bob confirmed. "Sometimes, like now, they like to pull everyone in at once, give everyone a location to dig and send us on our merry way. Then we all come back and show them what we dug up. If they see anything they like, they tag it for their own personal use and pay us to fix it up." Bob scowled. "If they see something they REALLY like, they'll take it off our hands then and there and pay us a finder's fee with no dickering whatsoever."

"So we're going in there?" Remus asked, gesturing at the base-in-the-base.

"Nah, that's for GDI people only," Bob replied. "Don't know what they do in there. Don't really care either."

Curious, Remus mused silently. The location of this base didn't really make much sense for supporting salvage operations. So what were the GDI hiding in here?

* * *

"Sir, I think this is it."

"It? What it?"

"A black box. This is a black box."

"A black... are you sure? You think this little thing is an FTL transceiver?"

"Yes, I do think it is."

"But it's tagged as a printer. How can you be sure it's what you think it is?"

"Sir, we've been combing this old base for months looking for lostech crap. We got a lot of stuff out of it including an HPG and some examples of Nighthawk armor. But we never found a black box... or thought we didn't."

"We were never sure this place had a black box. The Source Books were pretty vague on what could be found in here. So how can you be certain that this is a black box transceiver?"

"Well, for a start, one of the aliases for the black box is 'fax machine'. A black box is essentially just a fax machine with interstellar range. A black box is also described as small and hand portable. In other words, if you want to find a black box, you should look for something that resembles a fax machine. Back home, fax machines aren't much used anymore what with email and all. But really a fax machine is just a printer with a phone built into it. I think the initial inventory mis-identified this as a printer when it's really a fax machine."

"So how do you know this 'fax machine' is in fact a black box and not really just a plain old fax machine?"

"I found the user's manual for it. How many fax machines do you know that need the full output of a small fusion reactor to run?"

* * *

"Okay, people, listen up!" the GDI officer said to the assembled civilian contractors. "I know most of you have heard this all before, but we got some new people. And it doesn't hurt to remind everyone of the rules you'll be following."

"I'm Captain Gallagher. For the next few days while you're out in the sand, I will be God to you. You will go where I say, when I say, and dig up what I say. And while you're out playing in the sand, I and my people will be in a nice, air conditioned trailer watching you through a satellite feed and making sure you're doing exactly what you're supposed to be doing."

"Each party will be getting one of these." Gallagher held up a plain manila folder with a name scrawled on it. "This holds all the area

data you need to find the spot you'll be digging at and find what you're digging for as well as all the communications data you'll need to get into contact with us if you need to. You will go to your assigned areas however you please; for the more distant locations, Dropship transport will be provided if needed.

"Claim jumping' – that is, one party attacking another party – is expressly forbidden and the assigned locations are spaced wide enough apart so that you can't 'accidentally' run into each other. If anyone approaches your location, my eyes in the sky will radio you a warning. If by some extreme application of Murphy's Law you feel that you can't adequately handle intruders by yourselves from possible attackers, give us a call and we'll have a Leopard Gunship over to support you.

"Now this is not a license to just randomly go around and shoot up some zone gang or random passer by just because they got too close. You're allowed to defend yourselves, but we'd really prefer if you at least gave a warning first and give them a chance to vacate the premises before opening fire.

"Also, you're allowed to swap folders among yourselves, but let me or my people know if you do so. It will save all of us a lot of unnecessary aggravation if we don't think you're going to the wrong locations.

"And finally, each folder contains a copy of everything I just told you. Any questions?"

Townhouse, Fort Belvoir, Virginia, USA.
19:00, May 2, 3022 CE (adjusted.)

Ed was signing papers with an expression of grim horror directed at the impressively tall stack of triple carbons. He rolled his eyes and addressed the shadows behind him. "You needn't loom so impressively, Mr. Clark. I know you're there, and the Batman gambit is so very nineties, if you hadn't heard."

"Not funny," growled the former general.

"I have three herniated disks, significant cortical damage from a stroke, arthritis, and remnant injuries from that case of frostbite -- which I'm certain you've already been thoroughly briefed about. I don't DO funny any more. The painkillers tend to dull my sense of humor. Or so they tell me."

"The people watching you would differ. They're unhappy that you're sending messages they can't read." Clark was blunt. "Not to mention the fact that the NSA would dearly like to know how you're doing it, while the CIA would like to know why you are doing it."

"The why is easy, John. I'm trying to make some money, and maybe atone for a few things in my past. You, of all people, should sympathize. The how?" The younger man snorted. "You need to start recruiting more fanboys and girls from the 'net. If pop-culture can slip by the CIA so easily, think of what else might do the same."

"Pop culture?" Clark didn't move or change expression, but the palpable aura of irritation expanded throughout the room.

"Let me guess - the code and cipher mooks at Fort Meade are telling you that what they're getting is all gibberish, or that I'm using a schoolboy book code and you've been told you need to discover which book and which edition, right? Shows what they know." He waved an arm. "Siddown and take a load off. There's some Jack Daniels and branch water in the cabinet, and some Presidentes in the humidor next to them."

John paused, then took a glass from the cabinet and poured himself a drink. "Might as well. It's not as if anyone will accuse me of drunk on duty these days. By the way, how'd you get the Havanas? Jack's all for bringing down the embargo, but they still stop them at the border. And I didn't think you had any contacts at Guantanamo."

"I didn't. But some of my 'friends' did a favor for someone you might know. Guy named Gibbs, Jethro Gibbs? One of his suspects made a run for the border, so to speak, only to be found three days later in handcuffs and leg irons, locked inside the trunk of a stolen car, that was dumped on Annapolis grounds."

"How'd that happen?"

"The New Abolitionists aren't just against slavery. They hate pedophiles, too. And when you're not a LEO, you don't have to give a damn about national borders, hot pursuit, or any of that garbage."

That got a laugh out of Clark. "Trading favors for cigars. Heh. Whatever works. Just tell your 'friends' to keep it under control. We don't want them noticed as players. And tell me how the hell you're managing to get up the NSA's nose."

"Will do. And it's simple. No codes, no ciphers. Remember the Rosetta stone?"

John blinked, then gave an irked snort as all the facts came together inside his head. "An invented language?"

"And decades old, to boot. Tell your NSA geeks they need to brush up on their Lord of the Rings. I wrote those letters in High Elvish."

"And now that we know..."

"I'll use another method. Because it pleases me. And irks you. And Ryan. Tish loved pranks. How many people can say they've pranked a sitting President of the USA?"

"Point. And I'll even let you get away with it - once you've told me

what those letters were for."

"Employment. And this part IS going to piss you off, old man."

Clark leaned forward, a vague air of menace in his posture. "Why would it do that?"

"You've got leaks."

"Who. How. Now."

"Like I'm going to tell you?" Ed waved a hand towards the bookshelf of the old drawing room, a centuries-old bible taking pride of place on a center shelf. "Ever wonder about the loyalty of a chaplain, Clark? They swear an oath to the US, but they've also sworn an oath to God. Ever think about all the info a 'loyal' Jesuit padre is feeding to the Pope?"

"New Abolitionists on the inside."

"Yep. It didn't matter before - they mostly confined their activities to the slave trade here on Earth, and those leaks didn't matter and were rarely noticed."

"But it's different now."

"Like you said, it's different now. You're going to start losing some of your people to 'early retirement'. Let Jack know."

"You're forming your own intel section."

"I'm not. The New Abolitionists are. But I admit, that's a difference without a distinction. Back to the employment?"

"Back to the employment," said Clark. It was clear that they'd be returning to this subject later.

"Ever see that movie 'Damnation Alley'? The Landmaster vehicle in it was pretty impressive, and every bit as agile over harsh terrain as a track, but still had the speed of a wheeled vehicle."

"I remember it," John nodded.

"Given the crap-tacularly uneven state of technology in the Inner Sphere and the already confirmed shortage of command tracks among merc units, I made a suggestion or three. A front company for the NA is in touch with Dean Jeffries, the guy who built that thing. He designed it to run like a striped ape, use spare parts from junkyards, and still kick ass. Yet it doesn't use anything that could be considered 'lostech.' Nothing that would be restricted by current munitions and technology import/export regulations. That merc unit that Jack hired right out from under Vorash's nose? The Buron Cav? They fell in love with DRASH shelters, or so I'm told by those leaks I mentioned. What do you think they'll think of a decent mobile command vehicle that's actually in mass production?"

"It's not in mass production."

"It will be."

Clark poured himself a second drink. "Something good, something reliable, something they can use and want, something that can be mass produced, but nothing we can't out-tech, to coin a phrase."

"A-yep."

"You - and they - will have to get it past the CSN first."

"And why do you think I wrote those letters in Quenya?"

"To get me here," John laughed. "Pity. You could have had a bright career in the intel game, kid."

"I don't do bright. It makes you a target. And I've had enough of that shit for a lifetime."

"True. Then a drink to your business." Clark filled a second glass with Jack Daniels and passed it to Ed. "A toast. To cynics everywhere."

"To cynics, wherever they may be."

Mare Fecundiatis
Luna, Sol System
July 7th 2007

Sitting on the lunar mare was one of the shuttles from the dropship that had brought man to this airless world once more. A figure emerged from the craft, clad in a suit not much more complex than those of the first men who stepped onto this alien land. Without sound, save his own breathing, he walked away from the shuttle, in a way that would appear odd to those raised on Earth, if they were watching, but is better suited to a sixth of an Earth gravity.

Stopping far enough from the shuttle that its departure wouldn't disturb the dust, the figure drew a vial of water, taken from the Pacific Ocean, out of a storage pouch. With great care, the figure kneeled down and used his gloved hands to dig a small hole. Into the hole the vial was placed, and with equal care covered back up, now buried in the lunar dust.

He then drew a small pen knife, and used it to pin a shipping tag to the ground next to the burial site. He rose, and stepped back from the spot, snapping off an academy-perfect salute towards the tag before turning to walk back to the shuttle, still in silence. A few minutes later the shuttle departed, leaving only disturbed lunar dust to mark its former presence.

Should someone stumble upon the tag and read it, they would find the following inscription on the blank side:

*"Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me die
Glad did I live and gladly die
And I laid me down with a will!"*

*"This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he belonged to be
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."*

On the other side, inscribed is the following, using the spaces allowed for the tag's normal purpose:

Robert Anson Heinlein
Born July 7, 1907
Died May 8, 1988

an offer

March 28, 2007/3022

**GDI Headquarters, Antallos Traffic Control
Port Krin, Antallos**

Aladdin received a call from one of the pilgrim fleet ships. Chalid had informed him this particular call might prove worthwhile, so he answered.

"As-Salāmu `Alaykum, Mullah Al Azim. Or should I say Colonel?" it was an old, richly dressed man sitting in a top suite of a Monarch-Class dropship.

"Wa `Alaykum as-Salaam. As you wish, Mr..."

"How Impolite of me. I'm Marko Watanabe."

"Well Mr. Watanabe, how can I be of service?"

"As you might have noticed, I made a bit of money..." Aladdin nodded. "I am an old man, and while I neither look Azami nor have been named Ali, I do long to see the city of God."

"So do a lot of people, many of them in the same fleet as you, Mr. Watanabe."

"That's correct." He smiled. "I want to offer my services to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. My crew consists of skilled technicians, traders and other personnel. We could prove to be useful."

"Don't get me wrong, but we're limiting access to Motherlode and actually living there at the moment is right out of the question unless you're a GDI member. In a few years perhaps..."

"You might want to rethink this stance, Colonel." Watanabe smiled "For the license to open business on Motherlode, some of your lawyers and a nice sum of seed money... you can have the Starflower

and my advice to the CSN in terms of business."

"And this 'Starflower' would be...?"

"My Monarch class dropship." Al Azim was stunned. "I have seen the ship your high officers and the visitors to Mecca travelled in, and I can imagine your VIPs, journalists and guests of state could find a use for a top notch Monarch and its amenities."

"I... I will have to discuss this with my government, Mr. Watanabe..."

"Of course. Call me if you have an answer."

Port Krin, Antallos
The Periphery
August 29, 2007 /3022

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In medias res was a good place for a reporter. Stefan Beakley of CNN stood a good distance away from the dunes that marked the battlefield, and had gained a healthy respect for how FASA physics really translated into actual practice. The 9x modifier really too much of a shortcut to cover the wild assortment of weapon sizes, muzzle velocities, calibers, beam attenuation, and targeting systems, the air sizzled with streaks of fire as combatants tried to pick off each other from kilometers away. The desert directly east of Port Krin spread out with little in the way of cover, with rolling dunes allowing tanks to plow on at full speed. It was a place where the beauty of maneuver that etched Rommel in history was possible again.

But still, BattleMechs commanded the battlefield. Beakley was kneeling on a dune, watching with binoculars the distant battle line. Like most of the 'Motherloders' he did not feel any ingrained awe towards the supremacy of the 'Mech on the battlefield. Figures in the distance were just so much targets of opportunity, as tanks from behind him pumped out a steady rain of suppressing shots. However, huge and easier to see at range as they might be, Inner Sphere 'Mechs also had thick armor. They forced any conventional forces with them or against them to move in unison and try to combine firepower. In much the same way the first tank was termed a "landship" (and thus the British Landships Committee) , then the mercenary tanks clustered in escort around 'Mechs as if they were the equivalent of battleships. Mostly Vedettes and a few Schrecks, in terms of direct firepower they outmatched GDI tanks; if only they could get close enough to engage.

He turned to the cameraman. "We still do not know which of the other city-states sent these forces, but they are apparently a spoiling attack to disrupt our allies' advances elsewhere on the planet. We are here with GDI's Strategic Defense Forces to prevent a raid into the city. If you'll look there- " and he pointed at the sky a ways off into

the northwest to a twisted snarl of white strings "air superiority over Port Krin is still being contested. The raiders are also closing in while spread out to reduce their vulnerability to artillery. Unfortunately, at this point most of GDI's artillery is busy with plugging up other points of approach."

"Hey!" shouted someone from off-camera. The view turned to a GDI soldier approaching, and on the webbing of his helmet the screaming bronze eagle symbol had at its center two overlapping red stars. "Stop giving away tactical data. Get back to the command track."

"This isn't a live feed, ah... sargeant. Even if someone gets the disk, this whole thing should be over by then."

"Doesn't matter. We're pulling the media back, this place is going to get hot real soon."

Beakley nodded, then gasped. He hurriedly motioned for his cameraman to turn around. Eight BattleMechs approached, while the rest of the Company in the form of tanks swung around.

'Mechs were easily identifiable by their silhouettes, and two Jenners were at the flanks with their new Motherloader ELINT gear. Six humanoid forms walked tall, and apparently unconcerned about being noticed. Their shields were painted with a blue star over an eye-catching russet background. GDI tended to dislike the ordered 'battle line' movement of IS forces, as if BattleMechs were enacting Napoleonic battles writ large. Not this time. The sun glinted off dark-tinted pseudo-glass faceplates. Beakley grinned. He could see the similiaries, where the GM was really just a Hunchback with a redesigned torso and reinforced arms.

"These are GDI's... Earth's own BattleMechs! The GM series are being forced into combat despite stil being still in the test stage."

He could not offer any more commentary. It was, ultimately, a thing 'shaped like itself'. That eyeless mask, that rounded head, the broad head-crest, its lurching stride, with its three gun ports obvious under the T-angled chest, of two pairs of jump jets that scuffed the ancient lake bed, but most of all the AMS that screamed Alert! Alert! They

raised their shields as their head vulcans blazed.

In the distance a Catapult walked backwards to get away from coordinated MBT 120mm Improved Rifles unerringly chipping away at its armor. Smaller missile-carrier mechs, Valkyries and Vindicators, let loose their last supporting volleys. The GM series plucked several oversaturation LRM20 strikes out of the sky and kept on going, with GDI tanks rolling at their flanks. A handful missiles managed to get through, only to slap harmlessly upon the ceramic plates of the GM Medium Shield. These were the guardian machines that did not fear being outnumbered or overmatched. They were designed to draw hostile attention away from the tanks and, as a minuteman might, to drink deep from the jar of sacrifice.

The 'Mechs own PPCs and Large Lasers gave their reply. The sun was high, the dust was thick. The company surged forward, past the dune ridge where the reporter lay. He gave a whoop as they passed, and then bent over coughing.

After getting his breathing back in control, he turned to the camera."Over the past few months a massive amount of pilgrims, mercenaries and merchants have been flooding Antallos all to steadily increasing socio-political tension. Raids, sabotage and insurgent activity has steadily been increasing not just in Port Krin but all over Antallos.

This conflict is one that many have deemed inevitable, right from the very moment that GDI took control over Port Krin. However, though it has switched into open warfare, it is still unsure where the war actually 'started'. Many put the line in the sand in the Hermantown Massacre, where after slaves and poor peasantry took to the streets to petition the city despot to accept aid from GDI. They were machine-gunned down and their families brought out to be executed as well; in the words of Hermantown's new Generalissimo "Dreadlocks" Dee *'Now there's food enough for everybody'*.

It was shortly thereafter that the outlying farms of Port Krin were set ablaze and an increase of terrorist activity plagued the city. The Free Azami Army mobilized soon after, and while it is unknown who or where the first actual shot war fired it is clear now that GDI can no

longer afford to build up one city-state while ignoring the rest of the planet.

All across the planet, the other city-states are putting up stiff resistance, with an unexpected reserve of men and fighting machines. They don't realize the depth of the industrial capacity of another world that can be brought to bear, but the risk of this being bogged down into a Planet Vietnam is why GDI has allied with the Free Azami to quell and quickly dismantle the despotic regimes of Antallos' many city-states. Inevitable or not, this is conflict that is sure to be costly in terms of lives and resources, and even victory is sure to have heavy consequences.

This is Stefan Beakley, reporting, Port Krin!"

Union DropShip *Opadima*
High Orbit, Antallos
March 26, 2007/3022

Perhaps it began in the mind of a man whose soul burned with the need to fulfill his purpose. Most of the Free Azami dropships had already landed, for the simple reason that DropShips could only simulate gravity while moving, and it was quite unhealthy for their dependents to remain in zero-g for extended periods. Several thousand newcomers put a strain on Port Krin's food and housing, but true to form the populace adjusted as long as they were paid well. The Azami were a carefully keeping to themselves.

A few of their DropShips remained, in a parking orbit that gave the illusion of reasonable half- gravity. Mullah Chalid - Mullah **Hajji** Chalid al Aznar, a name his heart still had not fully grasped even after those weeks – stood at the panorama window and looked down at Antallos.

The most of the world was a dusty orange. Before GDI, most people had simply ignored that benighted rock on the Periphery. What made it so useful as a pirate haven was that it had NO value whatsoever; it was not worth whatever any House would spend just kicking off the pirates and trying to regulate the place to keep the scum from coming back.

Now, it had one, though very few yet only realized it. It was the gateway, the first and last barrier in the road to Earth.

Earth!

Algedi was his homeworld. He had no particular attachment to Earth as the birthplace of humanity. It might not exactly be the one from where their own ancestors had done *hegira*, but as Allah's justice was all-encompassing so their Kaaba called to their souls and the Mecca that shelters the bedrock of their faith was a place their hearts can rest.

He tugged at his beard. It was difficult for many others in the Inner Sphere to comprehend the desolation that the Muslims felt when the holy sites were destroyed by Amaris and his coup. The Catholics with their two Popes, for example, adapted just fine... apparently sustained by bureaucracy just as much as duty. The Jewish populations endured, much as they endured (with some confusion and bewildered amusement) being folded into the mainline Catholic dogma after the defeat of an ultra-radical Israel during the early chaos of the Terran Alliance. Those in Marik and Steiner space also had their own ways of expressing faith, if not exactly in competence of their State. The opposite was in the Draconis Combine, who deemed those not of Shinto-ized beliefs and the subdued work ethic as the Unproductives, which meant little tolerance for thought that might impinge upon the Coordinator's final authority. Those of Hindu descent in the Combine tended towards small family shrines or local temples rather than large, ostentatious displays that tended to displease the Kuritan authorities. The practices were not really so dissimilar, and with most Eastern modes of thought assimilated into the Dictum Honorium. As those who saw duty to one god, messiah or prophet, Moslems were treated differently.

The hardships of space travel had already been reconciled with Islamic practices. Due to the impractical expense of travelling to Terra and back, the *Hajj* was not one of the obligations stringently applied. To those who could, however, it was the ultimate act of piety. Along the way they must perform acts of kindness and try to convert even just one person into the faith. Whoever could do this was all but assured of a place in Heaven, and all prior sins forgiven- as if having become a new man.

It was a precious gift. With the loss of Mecca, most people of other worlds pointed their prayers towards their planet's main mosque. The building of new mosques was troublesome. An important pillar of their faith was lost; their religion still stood, but the wound remained- those born into the faithful could only look forward to looking at, what? A hole in the ground? It was more than just history, it was an affirmation of the relationship between God and Man.

The Azami believed, in the *Shi'ite* tradition, of a future Messiah, an *Imam* they would know as 'Zaman, who would redeem them. Al Aznar was a tall, dark man of Hamitic stock. He too believed that the Zaman would be one of their own, but there were very stringent qualifications. With the loss of Mecca, many of those simply became impossible to attain or confirm.

Now - Earth!

"Allah is great. Allah is merciful." he murmured with wonder. If the Catholics thought they had an obligation to the Inner Sphere in place of the two Churches that just let Comstar play loose with their perfidy, Al Aznar wanted to bring to all the faithful their new task; something which unites them all through age, creed, distance, or political affiliations. This Earth must stand. This Earth must abide. It was their key to salvation.

Aladdin had spoken the truth, the literal truth. This was a gift from almighty Allah. Everyone had thought it was poesy, but it was the pure truth. He still could not fully grasp it.

The Torah, and the Bible, of the Jews and Christians, these were

treated as holy and respected by the Azami, as Moslems, for they all worshipped the same God. The Book of Mohammed was just the conclusion of the work as the final Prophet. The Zaman's work would be worldly and practical. They all had a story about God wanting to destroy ancient cities, each a breeding ground of evil, but giving in to a request to spare them if there were only ten righteous souls within. He shuddered when he thought about his home, the Inner Sphere, being the estate of the evil, the self-loving, and the lost. After having seen ancient Earth, he could not help but see some truth in that sentiment. **Of course** Allah would not give them their messiah. They had not **earned** that deliverance.

He had sworn to protect Earth, as he knelt in front of the Kaaba, in the most beautiful moment of his life. There were thousands of the faithful there, dressed in white, and he was just one more soul among them. He had fallen to his knees and cried like a baby, and he had not been ashamed of it.

And - Antallos.

Al Aznar reached out, as if he could grip the world within his fist. GDI had requested that he keep the secret. Let it be Mecca, a perfect duplicate Mecca for a while. It was the literal truth, after all. They had come to punish Alladin, and them for that blasphemy... and failing to do so would somewhat shame them. No matter. They would **never** raise a hand against the holy land or those that protected it.

The GDI were competent. They were also isoft.

Their Earth was so clean, so full of prizes equal or even sometimes superior to lostech, and they held to deals so untarnished by the crushing hardship of the void. He could not really blame them, those steeped in luxury were molded not to consider how to do without their overabundance. It was not they were lazy, but that they enjoyed the thrill of discovery far more than the triumph of persistence. That more strengthened his vow. They were all brothers under the faith, only he was like the older brother wise to how the world really worked and they were the youngest child trying to look tough despite being spoiled all his life. He had a responsibility to protect his still all-too-innocent brother.

Why limit themselves to one city? GDI had the power to crash through the walls of any other city-state. Instead of bringing the light into all the rest of the world, they had gone so far and only that, huddling around the warmth offered by their campfire. The Hajj had come to Antallos, in full force hoping to sieze the world from GDI if necessary. It did remain far enough from the Combine, a most useful base of operations, now that someone had done most of the dirty work in kicking the pirates offplanet. He had not believed Aladdin, because for all that GDI boasted about despising slavery, they still allowed the same scum to live within their domains.

They had come to purify the filth. They had brought enough dependents to re-settle and manage Port Krin at least. How gratifying instead to be rebuked so thoroughly for his lack of imagination. Allah's glory was grander than anything he could have dared contemplate.

So be it then. It was GDI that protected Earth. And these other city-states still made raids upon them? Their criminal scum sought to strike terror into these few working for everyone's ultimate benefit? All the good being built, to be stolen, destroyed, or defiled. They dared to strike at those who protected the Gate of Salvation? For their lusts and greed, they dare! GDI will not act without clear proof, despite suffering from the attacks? GDI forgives far, far too much. If they will not do it, then the Azami will!

Earth must be protected! Thus, Antallos, as the gateway to deliverance, -must- be secure. GDI cannot even -pretend- to control a whole world, even one as barren as this. They were far too -nice-, they were wasting time. They did not understand that the scum of Antallos only speak the language of brutality. The Azami will do these one better; to speak to them in the voice of DEATH.

He stepped back and made his way into the DropShip's bridge. "Call the captains." he told the comm officer. "I have decided. Yes... again, we make war upon the infidel."

They gathered inside the briefing room of the DropShip **Opadima**. Many of these men were not given to mystic experiences. The aspect of their struggle even demanded brute pragmatism. The Azami made up the bulk of the -Hajj-, they were the closest and most active in the region. Officially the whole of the Azami worlds were still under the authority of the Draconis Combine, and thus the Free Azami Army could not really make use of overt support from their own multitude. They were outlaws in the eyes of the Combine, and any Azami that helped them were criminal co-conspirators.

Chalid al Aznar looked around. He led the assembly by virtue of his age, experience, and wealth. His Star Lord JumpShip could carry six DropShips all by itself, a prize for any Successor Lord, and it was with ruthless resistance that his family managed to keep it from 'pirates' and other opportunists. Of course, having the ability to travel between star systems also gave the ability to make important connections. "Before we begin, is there any here who disbelieves that holy Mecca again exists upon this universe?"

Numa Nas had skin so dark as if he was cut right out of shadow. He honed his skill in deep raids along the Davions and Liao borders, leading a fast ambush lance, and it was rumored only half his kills were done while inside a BattleMech. "No one doubts your word, al Aznar." he said in a toneless whisper. "What sort of leverage could anyone pull to make you follow such a complicated charade? If it is simpler to believe that it is Mecca, then so be it."

Seated next to him, Harun Imhasseb, Captain of the DropShip Opadima and the Azami Air Wing, clearly disapproved. "It is a miracle, but... it is not our Mecca. Do we even have a right to direct our prayers upon it?"

Imam Khalil Ibrahim pointed with an age-shrunken hand. "So many of us have come here in blind faith, fully prepared to bow down to a duplicate... a fake, as long as it was cunningly well-made. Heh, heh." He had accompanied Al Aznar to 'Motherlode', and saw there several difficult doctrinal conflicts with the Azami mystical tradition. That only reinforced the authenticity. "Young people these days need symbols to remind them of who they are, ah, hah, how so lazy."

That so many people willingly risked the journey, even bringing along their families, reflected the drought of spirituality in the Inner Sphere. Islam was not just a religion, but a way of life, and their obligations tied together all Muslims no matter who or where they were. There was a more secular reason, though. Many of them were identified dissidents and being hunted by the Draconis Combine. Like George Watanabe, giving it all up to fate, for there was no longer a place for them to return.

"Allah is everpresent. The teachings of Muhammad apply to them and to us, and therefore it is our duty to stand here and protect the home of the faithful." Al Aznar added with a raised palm. "If you accept that their -Earth- contains Holy Mecca, and The Prophet's Medina, and the Africa from where our bloodlines spring, then there is no task too great or too small to accomplish this duty."

"Does that involve putting ourselves under GDI's authority?" Numa Nas asked dangerously.

"All but that." Al Aznar replied with a thin smile. "We must aid them in every way we are able, but while we must respect their sworn duty of protecting the whole of Earth, we already see that their priorities are a bit... misguided. Our command chain must remain short for speed and flexibility. We have no bureaucracy to burden our soldiers."

"They are good people, but naive. They are like pampered children, that the only hardship they have is deciding how much to give up for charity." said Imhasseb. Compared to the arid world that the Azami have settled, whose inherent inhospitality was part of what let them be overlooked for most of the Age of War, Earth was a wellspring of excesses. "If we allow them to direct our forces, then the only thing we can be sure of is for these forces -not- to be used to punish the wicked."

"This is our burden as -Fedayeen- protectors of the -Dar-al-Islam-." Numa Nas intoned. Part of their duties also involved repercussions for abuses against Muslims, specially in the Draconis Combine and the Periphery. When the government cannot provide that protection (or was the abuser), it was up to the volunteers to further the cause.

"If it is true, then all well and good, but we have more practical concerns." added Captain Qabil bin Murwon, leader of the Tepseet Terrors mercenary company. "This is Antallos- and I know how this place works. If we're blocked from going to 'Motherlode', and most everybody wants to go there, then GDI can just keep on leeching us until they deliver the locations."

"Earth." Imhasseb interrupted. "We should accept that as fact until evidence proves otherwise. But the point still holds, Mullah - our people require food, shelter, and protection."

"None of you trust GDI to provide this protection?" asked Al Aznar.

"Since the last month alone, there have been seven separate attacks on Port Krin and their vital holdings. All have been repulsed, but not without casualties. There are plenty of thieves and smugglers operating within the city. Some of the farmlands around the city were deliberately put to the fire."

Antallos was mainly a desert world only little better than Algedi or several other desert worlds settled by choice by the North African colonists (who would later unite into the Azami) who simply wanted to be left alone. They, and the raiders, knew just how much of an affront that was. Even Al Aznar looked shocked. This had not been reported to him, perhaps even his own household did not want to ruin the happy glow in coming back from Earth. "Who did this?! What was GDI's response?"

"The response was in the transports that accompanied your return, - Mullah-. They just shipped in more packaged food." Imhasseb shook his head sadly. "It seems that Motherlo.. Earth, produces so much that even offworld flour is cheaper than local stockpiles."

Qabil bin Murwon laughed, the only clean-shaven man among them, showing off the long red scar that went from one cheek to another. "Earth, far too simple a name for such a tendency for overspending. Motherlode fits better."

"Who sent these slash-and-burn raids?" Al Aznar hissed. "And how are

they getting through?"

"Likely Proctor, though some of the 'Mechs were seen in the last raid before that were seen in Port James. As for the methods; it is as we would have done it, men and light vehicles that too easily disappear into the confusion of the marketplace. Much damage can be done even without 'Mechs. As for Mech raids, trailing caravans to excuse their radar presence, then running off to shut down in the valleys."

"And GDI continues to let them get away with this." Al Aznar said with a sigh.

Numa Nas frowned slightly. "They lack 'Mechs that can reliably go over eighty kilometers per hour. Their reliance on tanks to provide a wall for a pincer attack means that even their faster 'Mechs must slow down to sixty-five to allow them to catch up. If their faster machines go on ahead, they risk getting separated and cut apart. It does have the benefit of any attack against such a well-ordered formation nothing less than suicide. Their aircraft are also notoriously fragile."

"This is not the time for defense!" bin Murwon shouted suddenly. Though younger, less cautious, and less deadly in personal combat than Numa Nas, his mercenary command was larger. He had the brashness of youth with something to prove. "If cut off from the source, these irritants will -stop-."

Imhasseb helpfully noted "GDI continues to declare that they respect people's lives and the rule of law. They refuse to act without proof. They may feel they have no -right- to interfere."

"Such hypocrisy."

"Even Motherlode's resources isn't bottomless. Although..." Imhasseb turned to Al Aznar. "What would they do if for some reason the other petty warlords do manage to retake Port Krin?"

"Such an event would surely be celebrated with raping, looting and burning, and GDI's rage would be incalculable. They do not understand... while on Earth, a passing conversation assured me that if ever it was necessary, GDI would have no problem raising an army,

several armies, with more soldiers in it than this entire world has people. Only self-consumed idiots cannot see that GDI's taking control is the best thing to happen to this planet since the Star League."

"That is why they are the unbelievers. They do not believe in anything apart from self-gratification." old Ibrahim said firmly.

"Charity is admirable. Numbers mean nothing unless you have the will to fight." bin Murwon groused further. "We will not let things go that far, I trust?"

"Attacking the food supply directly threatens our people on the surface. We have the right to take action." Numa Nas added. His eyes glittered with dark promise.

"Upon the Kaaba I have sworn to defend Earth. Antallos is the gateway. It must be held." Al Aznar fiddled with some controls on the round table, and its center opened up to expose the projector for a holotank. A map of Antallos spread out. "Now, are our forces sufficient to defeat GDI?"

"What? But did you not say we were supposed to aid GDI?" asked bin Murwon.

Numa Nas understood the question. "We have three full battalions, while theirs including the Foreign Legion is barely more than one mongrel regiment, one and a half at best. Their tanks are poor direct combatants, mostly useful in holding action. In a straight fight, maybe."

"Could we take Port Krin?"

"Their combined arms may be stifled by the poor quality of their tanks and the lack of ASF cover, but even I would not want to go up to a prepared position backed by that ungodly artillery."

"So, old friend. you say we can feel safe in leaving our people under GDI's protection."

"I do say so." Numa Nas grinned fiercely. "Most specially when those

who may have designs upon it are too... busy... just trying to survive."

"Allah be praised, so we ARE attacking." bin Murwon raised both hands in joy.

Imhasseb did not look so convinced. "And then what? Even if we do defeat the other city-states, what do we do with their cities and leaders once we have seized them?"

Chalid Al Aznar's expression was stony and beyond any appeal. "The cities we will give to GDI. The murderous, slave-keeping scum, they will all die."

"Hasana, hasana. But there is a risk here you may not be seeing." said Imam Ibrahim.

"What it is, honored elder? None of us fear death, and failure... we will not fail." asked Numa Nas.

"It is likely GDI will disapprove, but they will have no choice in the matter. The gateway must be secured, and if they do not manage the other city-states, they will leave more innocents to suffer in the infighting as the rabble bicker to fill the empty seats of power. I do not doubt they will take up the burden, lest they be shamed as unto boastful liars." al Aznar added.

"It is GDI that holds the key to the gate. If you do this, they may deny you entry into Mecca." the old man intoned.

That did worry them. It mattered less to bin Murwon, but even he could not deny the respect it would bring. As an Azami, he must fulfill that expectation of never retreating from a worthy battle. "They... they cannot deny it to us forever. They have no right!"

"No, they cannot." al Aznar assured them. "But they may ask that those who participate in this should delay the journey for some years. It is their world, after all. They are like drowning men with their heads just above water. I have no illusions that they will be thankful for this gift... we must forgive them for such ignorance."

"I have no problem with this." Numa Nas said flatly. "It means my men will stay in Antallos, and in active duty for its defense."

"I... will endure, if it comes to that." bin Murwon added. The glory of battle, it was more real to him.

Imhasseb's concern was not for himself. "Port Krin is not big enough to hold others who will make Hajj once the word is spread to the Inner Sphere. We should perhaps pick a city that will serve as our own base of operations." He looked up from staring at the world map. "That IS part of why we arrived in such strength. Antallos is very much like our own worlds. Others will come for the Hajj, and with them the strength to hold out against any ill-trained bandit group no matter how many."

"We will see at the negotiating table. This means that we must be able to make use of the populace. There will no foraging, no mercenary will profit from this any more than battlefield salvage."

Numa Nas nodded. "It is written. We will abide by the -Sharia- as it speaks of noncombatants. But the law we carry will be less kind than GDI, we will suffer less of the vile to slip through the cracks."

"We speak of negotiating a new status quo with GDI afterwards..." Captain Imhasseb continued "But what about any interference from them while this is under way?"

"How can they?" bin Murwon scoffed. "All the target sites are thousands of kilometers away from each other and Port Krin. Once we start attacking their home city-states, these groups will likely start falling back. If they attack Port Krin, then I will shed no tears for their stupidity." For the same reason, the other city-states would not be able to come to each other's aid or send anything out for a sneak attack to GDI. "We have already practiced the simultaneous attack."

Chalid Al Aznar looked at each of them, and then nodded. "Then we are all agreed. I myself will lead the Sword of Algedi into battle. Now we just have to divide our forces."

They continued to plan, without any regret or hesitation about the

road they must take. Not one of them ever considered that they may have been misreading the situation.

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METI Minister's Office
Tokyo, Japan, Earth
Grantville Cluster
6 March, 2007/3022

Or perhaps, here, as a group of mercenaries learned of their new contract, and in the fulfillment of that obligation shaking Comstar loose from its smug repose. The Skull Squadrons were finally pluralized again. Once a merc unit known for its ASF and light mech responsiveness, like most mercenaries they had been whittled down over the years. They had lost more than 'Mechs, but family. The 'Mechs could be replaced, but the memories of loss remained.

A mercenary company remained a business, however. Rick and Lisa Cocker could speak for the entirety of the mercenaries and their families; Rick as the overall leader and Lisa for DropShip command and their dependents. Max and Miriya were there, the latter for her familial relationship to the JumpShip Minn Mei's captain and her husband because, surprisingly, he had started off as the merc company's accountant.

The Minister for Trade and Economy was Hoshi Nasuno, a faintly pudgy bespectacled man. He could speak for the Diet, since officially the mercenaries were employed not by the Japanese government but by the HINODE Industrial Compact. Leery of any militaristic implications in the public's eye, only recently had it seemed acceptable to begin rebuilding their own ability to project force.

"Because you, among the mercenaries and pirates that attacked Earth, did not cause anything more serious than some property damage, there is greater leeway in your surrender terms. GDI did not call for you to join the attack on Antallos because there was no use for your light assets." Miriya humfed and looked insulted. The Minister of External Trade and Industry smiled slightly. "Yes, well, I believe we can move past that now. We can renegotiate our contracts here, or

you can simply leave with no further debts or obligations. Your converted mecha, however, must stay here. As previously agreed, you will be more than adequately compensated."

Rick frowned. That was understandable. The new LAMs used EndoSteel, and their patrons would be downright stupid to just hand off a working sample of their 'lostech' for reverse-engineering. Battlefield salvage was another thing entirely, as many of the Motherloder components were designed to be replaceable rather than recoverable. "You're not really giving us much choice here. The only other place we can get LAMs is from the Draconis Combine."

"Surely you understand what it means to be Dispossessed, Nasuno-san." Lisa added archly. "Let's not play games here. You need our DropShips, and our preferential relationship to a JumpShip."

Minister Nasuno laughed. It was not comforting however, for it was the trained laughter of the public official. He did not laugh because he found it amusing, but because it was appropriate. "So ka. Your service with pilot testing and mechanical development has been invaluable and much appreciated. These are not enough to make up for the cost of LAM conversion equipment, not to mention new Stinger BattleMechs to complete a LAM squadron."

No one raised any objection that they had not asked them to meddle with the Skulls' 'Mechs. The mercenaries could simply have rejected the offer right from the start, even if they were prisoners, but who in their right mind would say no to a contract that guarantees them new 'Mechs at the end of it?

"As you said, let us not play games. We have need of your mecha and your skills, and we provide funding and further support. We can continue to do business together." the Trade Minister continued. "There are other options to contract renegotiation... for instance, you could become Japanese citizens, and we could simply write off the costs of most of your military hardware. You will never again have to worry about employment or support."

"If we were just a mech company, that would be good." Max spoke up. "But we're also infantry and tradesmen, and we like being able to

work on the side from House to House." Letting go of pride and looking for ways to earn a living without fighting, relying on the cargo capacity of a Dropship without the heavier command lance, was how the company managed to survive well enough even before the incredible temptation of Vorax' call to arms.

"If we fold into your... Regulars... we'd have to wait until command decides it's time for a proper war. It's been fun, okay, but it's boring now." Miriya added. "You gave us new mechs. What's the point of it all if we don't -fight-?"

"Dear, garrison duty is easy money. There's nothing wrong with that..."

Lisa sighed. As much as she liked the logic of gainful and risk-free employment, she had to agree with Miriya. "With all due respect, what's the point in increasing our combat potential if we're not going into any dangerous situations? We are mercenaries, after all." She turned to her husband, who nodded.

"We're ready." said Rick. "What have you got?"

"You must understand, Kakeru-san, this is a mission that will require all of you; all of the Skull Squadrons, and your DropShips, and the JumpShip. It will likely take up the better part of a year. We can't in good conscience allow you to take on... dependents... into potentially hostile territory. If you choose to take this contract, then your families MUST stay here."

Part of him resented the obvious implication of their children being used to guarantee their loyalty and good behaviour, but he mostly felt relief that they would be well away from the line of fire. "That's fine. But who are we working for, exactly?" There was difference between Japan, CSN, and GDI; if mostly in terms of compensation. "What kind of mission are we talking here?"

"This is a long-term security contract for the Antallos and Near Periphery Trading and Acquisitions Standard Company, and thus we are transferring your contract to multinational control." It was somewhat like trading basketball teams, he did not say. "There are

certain legal issues should GDI provide a military escort for the trading mission, but..." the Minister trailed off with a gesture.

"... as mercenaries, we have no implication that we're infringing on the 'rights' of civilian businessman, or that GDI is intruding on the domains of a sovereign state." Lisa finished. No matter how well-intentioned, it would seem like an invasion.

"The Kuritan security forces have the excuse that they are there to protect their own assets on lease. Should GDI have to provide security, then we will have to send forces using the elements we are familiar with- aircraft, tanks, artillery, and we know from the fighting on Port Krin what it takes to defeat enemy mecha using 'conventional' arms."

Max pointed out an objection. "You're going to need more than just three DropShips for that."

"Exactly. A trade mission must leave some room for trade goods." the minister replied with a grin. "There is no point in hiding it. We simply do not have any mecha or fighters to spare. You are preferred because you already know how to fight in the fast, air-land combined arms that we favor. This is the first true trade mission to a foreign power; it -must- succeed."

"Are you sure?" Lisa asked archly. "I saw a Hammerhead and a Seydlitz back on HINODE the other day."

"Let me rephrase then. We do not have any mecha or fighters to spare away from our need for defense, research, and reproduction or the additional ASF carrier dropships for them." Antallos was far too important to leave to a piecemeal defense.

Rick scratched at his hair. "So we're providing cargo hauling AND security. You're going to send some business representatives, right? We need to know if they have the right to order us around." It still freaked him out that Nippon was so close to becoming the Draconis Combine but for one very important cultural aspect; they were a nation of merchants, not warriors. "Profit is kind of pointless if you're not around to spend it, we shouldn't have to make sure they're not

annoyed as we're trying to protect them."

"They will be completely under your power all through the journey. You are -ronin-, and for these many months they will be utterly under your power. They will be strangers and passengers, totally dependent on someone else. Their fear, you understand it, neh?"

"All too well." Lisa replied softly. "But we also won't have the time to consult in combat. We may be mercenaries, but we have honor of our own." She leaned over and placed her elbows on her thighs. Lisa laced her fingers together and looked at him over the arched hands. All she needed now was orange sunglasses. "Nuke shield or not, if something happens to our children while we're away, I -will- find a way to -end- you."

That brought a real smile to the Minister's face. "Now that is reassuring. Let that ferocity make it worth all the resources we've spent in fitting to your equipment with the best our little country can provide."

"Refits are nice and all, but we've been dancing around the issue. Just how much are we -getting paid-?"

"Hahaha, my apologies, Parina-san, Kakeru-san. Here are the revised contracts."

Mercenary Contract

This agreement, executed between the CSN and the Antallos and _Near Periphery Trading and Acquisitions Securities Company_ (hereafter designated "Employer") and ____Skull Squadrons____ (hereafter designated "Unit") provides employment for the unit and support forces in the service of the Employer. This employment is subject to terms and conditions outlined below.

I. Mission: The Unit is hired for the performance of a mission planned and assigned by the Employer, defined as a _Long-term Escort and Defense

Deployment_ mission under the conventions and usages of conventional military terminology. Said Unit will perform all operations that fall within the framework of this mission, as well as serving the general interests and needs of the Employer. If the unit has been hired on retainer, the following types of missions are specifically excluded during the length of service: ___N/A___.

II. Forces: The Unit agrees to provide combat and support forces, estimated at _4 squads_ of combat and/or combat support troops, as of date this contract goes into effect. The Employer reserves the right to terminate the agreement if actual forces mustered at the time this contract goes into effect are 75 percent or less of the originally estimated forces, or if they exceed the agreed-upon strength by more than 10 percent, unless excess troops serve for no more money than originally designated in this agreement.

III. Length of Service: This contract will remain in effect for _6_ months, commencing on _8/22/3022_ and concluding on _3/22/3023_. On the commencement date, the Unit agrees to be located on _Antallos_; if the unit fails to appear by said date, Unit shall relinquish 5 percent of its fee. Upon termination of the agreement, the Unit will be discharged from all duties and responsibilities to the employer, unless discharge is superseded by a fresh agreement.

IV. Remuneration: The Employer agrees to pay _25000_ C-bills per squad per month to the unit, amounting to an estimated total of _600,000_ C-bill-equivalents. This money is to be paid out in the following manner:

Money is to be paid half in advance and half upon return to Port Krin after completion of mission.

V. Command Rights: The Unit hereby agrees to place

itself under the overall military direction of the Employer. The Employer will implement this direction through the assignment of _a Liaison Officer_ to the unit for the period of contract. The Unit is guaranteed to retain internal coherence and consistency of its command structure within the usual limits of this assigned command status.

VI. Transport: The Employer agrees to provide for the interstellar and/or interplanetary transport of the Unit. _100_ percent of the Unit accepts Employer interstellar transport and _0_ percent of the Unit accepts interplanetary transport. The Employer shall pay the unit _0 C-bills_ to reimburse the unit for providing transport to the unit or any part thereof.

VII. Supply: The Employer agrees to provide the amount of _10000_ C-bills per month for the logistical support of the unit. The Employer will reimburse the Unit for the amount of _0_ C-bills_ if Unit provides its own supplies. Resupply of munitions and other specific battlefield material after each major battle or campaign shall consist of _5000 C-bills_ over and above said supply requirements.

VIII. Salvage Rights: All equipment, vehicles, and other war material recovered by the unit from the enemy forces, depots, garrisons, industrial or civil centers, prisoners, and other sources shall be subject to the following claims and terms of division:

Payment in kind, with limited claim on certain equipment or materiel as stated below:

All intact Fusion Engines are claimed by the employer with fair compensation for their proper market value

All BattleMechs of the type Stinger, Wasp, Valkyrie, or Phoenix Hawk are claimed by the employer, with fair compensation for their market value

All other salvage is claimed by the unit, on offer to

the Employer at discretion

IX. Other terms: Other terms of the contract, agreed to by both parties, shall be negotiated on a case-by-case basis and attached, individually signed and witnessed, as riders to this document.

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"Only ten thousand C-bills a month for supplies? That's barely enough to cover costs in replacement armor." said Rick Cocker. "A ton of AC/5 ammo would already set us back four and half thousand C-bills, and it's going to be difficult enough trying to find rounds in the caliber of the Light AC/5 you're giving us. Hell, you people made my 'Mech's LRM pinions incompatible with anything other than single-shot missiles!" It was in supply that most mercenaries actually made most of their money, and in salvage prizes, for often standard 'per squad' rates were just a bit more than the upkeep and wages of all those within. HINODE was paying 'Veteran' rates, which doubled that.

"Well, we cannot really -supply- you as such, from lightyears away. However, you will be provided with a stockpile of weapons and equipment before setting off- the costs are not reflected in the contract itself."

Considering that said equipment might as well be called 'lostech', there was no real way of assessing their value. As long as he had access to excellent Motherloder missiles, Rick felt it was worth it. "Do we have to reimburse you for it?"

"No need, Kakeru-san. Though temporarily lent to the ANPTAC, you are still HINODE retainers. It would be most impolite not to provide at least even basic resources for re-arm and repair. We will not even be removing the Endo Steel mini-factory on board the Daedalus. We will trust you to protect it, and to apply self-sufficiency whenever

possible."

"So this is just food money. I can live with that." said Max. Miriya jabbed him with her elbow for the pun.

Lisa did not look quite as convinced. "You do realize you're overpaying us by... quite a lot, to be honest. We're grateful for everything, but even with the new 'Mechs, we're still a small unit. The last time we saw terms like these, it was for a suicide mission."

Minister Nasuno actually looked confused. "But of course survival is most important. Why should we pay half of sizable sum in advance if we do not expect you to follow through? We do need that trade mission to complete its run." He shook his head, dismissing that thought. "You will be paid half in advance of six hundred thousand C-bills, but since the Comstar letter of credit is useless here you will be given three million US dollars or you can wait until you can convert the sum into C-bills at Antallos. The trade mission will be carrying assets that can be converted into liquid currency, so supply and repair costs can either be paid in advance or monthly or requisitioned after a major battle."

"We would rather have the dollars now." Lisa replied. It would be their last chance to get fresh food and 'lostech' equipment, some of which could also be traded to the Periphery for their own profit. Scuttlebutt, or military gossip, had let her know about the -millions in C-bills- that other mercenary companies were paid, but as a small outfit the Skulls had no need to get greedy. As her husband had announced, to keep the others in his unit from feeling left out, they could only really expect to get paid what they had earned.

Besides that, the other mercenaries had for their millions been isolated in military base for hard training and eventual offworld combat duty. Of that moment, the Foreign Legion still remained in Antallos. They, instead, were trapped in a luxurious resort town. It was better to be bored, the other mercenaries probably hated them in return for their luxuriously soft duties.

All in all, they were glad it was done. Even their infantry complement was itching for the discomfort of Jump travel.

"It's still too good..." Rick muttered. Such good fortune just -did not- happen to the Skulls. Bringing back a 'motherload' of Fusion Engines would have them a target for practically every pirate within reach of the OWA. The list of things that could go wrong was staggering.

The others there controlled their emotions better, but even Minister Nasuno could tell theirs was a wariness like that of a guard dog beaten a bit too often. It would come when called, but expecting the stick as well as food. He too had doubts about the enterprise, but there was simply no other choice.

Those there understood perfectly well that whole armies were most vulnerable while still in their quite crunchable DropShips. CSN, and GDI by extension, had no other ASF assets. They could purchase perhaps ASFs from the market on short notice, but not skilled pilots they could trust not to backstab them on the return trip.

"You -must- succeed." the Minister added firmly, his voice pitching up to a desperate note at the end. "You will be carrying everything we can spare, short of nuclear weapons. You are... an -investment-. We do nothing more than just hope you prove worthy of this trust."

Lisa shook her head. How so like and unlike the Combine. "I can't tell you not to worry, since I'm worried too, but at least please be assured that failure is no option for us either. We won't abandon this duty at any point, you can be sure of that."

"Thank you, Kakeru-san, that is all we ask."

"Oh, bullshit."

"What?" Minister Nasuno leaned back on his chair as if physically struck. He stared wide-eyed at Max, and his expression flashed briefly into a snarl. "How dare you... what more do you want?!"

He grinned back in return, his round eyeglasses glinting oddly. "Don't think I failed to notice that you chose Stingers to refit into the VF LAMs. Alpheratz makes Stingers. You want us to maybe encourage them to buy the refit kits too?" No matter how bad the OWA's

economy, the exchange would grant them a lot of excess funding to devote to turning their paltry BattleMech production into something more in keeping with their air-power ethos. Besides which, if the deal pulls through and the trade mission does manage to get away with practically every Fusion Engine in OWA stock, it would give the OWA mech plants something to do other than twiddle their thumbs waiting for the next batch of Engines to roll out.

The Trade Minister nodded. "That would be good, yes." Ideally, he preferred a buy-out of that factory, it would serve HINODE's interests much further. It was a topic to broach only after several more trips though.

If just sending their own forces, no matter how necessarily few, would ruffle the Outworld Alliance's paranoia, then economic intrusion no matter how helpful might lead to direct refusal or resentment. 'Che, we have enough trouble just owning American car factories, and they're supposed to be our main trading partner.'

Miriya clapped her hands. "Okay. This is a GOOD thing. Don't you worry, Minister sir. For this much loot, we'll kick much ass!"

"I would prefer it if, really, you don't. A nice boring trip would be the best thing for all of us."

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In retrospect perhaps it was the fault of anyone with any hint of institutional authority, for not being able to keep Miriya Parina in control.

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GDI Headquarters
Motherloder Sector
Port Krin, Antallos
April 1, 2007/3022

At first, General Don Davis was like 'are you serious?', but then he

laughed out loud. "Hahaha, that's great, you had me going there for a second." Even Ambassador Smith could not resist a chuckle, and Samantha Murdock (officially his assistant and unofficially Head of CSN Intelligence Operations) smiled brightly.

"You dare mock us?" Qabil bin Murwon spat.

"... you dare mock us?" Davis repeated in a high-pitched tone of voice. "Oh, that's good. Thanks. I needed that."

The young Azami snarled and would have gone for the throat, but a calm hand on his shoulders held him back. Al Aznar shook his head. He also looked faintly amused but for different reasons.

Colonel Chou Kurita, commander of GDI's regular forces, sigh. "I understand why you think this is amusing, but do remember that they come from a different homeworld. They don't necessarily place the same cultural value on April One." Nor did he, but he accepted the fact of his cultural contamination.

April Fool's Day was an Earther holiday. GDI General Don Davis blinked. "You're serious." he blandly asked the Azami delegation. At their nod, he added "ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR EFFING MIND?!"

Chalid Al Aznar held up his hand. "It is because we expected you to act this way that we take no insult from your behaviour. Be careful, General Davis. This is a task we offer in good faith and friendship." In a lighter tone he asked "What is the significance of April the First?"

"On Earth, it marked the change of the Western calendar from an old Roman calendar to a newer, more accurate one. Those who insisted on treating April 1 as the start of the year had jokes played on them. Eventually, it became a holiday for jokes."

"Ah. Most unfortunate." He turned back to General Davis. They had even waited for additional infantry companies to arrive. "We are not joking."

"As if I didn't have enough problems on my plate. If you say you're friends, you won't do this, all right? Insurgency is bad enough as it is,

if we give the rest of the planet reason to resent us, we're never going to get anywhere."

"Cowardice." scoffed bin Murwon. "You have more than enough forces to sieze this planet completely. If you're incapable of protecting yourselves from mere criminal scum, then we will cleanse this filth for you."

"We didn't come here to become overlords! If you give us those cities to manage, then we'd have to shoulder new costs of reconstruction and rehabilitation ALL AT ONCE. Even our pockets are not bottomless. If you try to manage it yourselves and don't limit migration, they're going to end up flocking here anyway to stress our food supply. If you don't - if you try to rule through fear and oppression, changing nothing - then as GDI's credo is that freedom is the right of all sentient beings, you're just being a hypocritical, power-hungry ass that's no different from the old boss. We'd be gunning for you too in the end."

"Might be interesting to see you try." the younger man bared his teeth.

"Enough. General Davis, these other cities will prove little trouble. We have experience in these things. Shortage of people for defense and management is not a problem, I had already sent word for more volunteers. Trust me in this, they will come."

"The other city-states might be scum, but at least we know where they're coming from. You're trying to take over Antallos by stepping on our prerogative and displacing the local population. I've seen this happen too. No. We eventually -**must**- deal with the other city-states, we know this. Even if you can take over the cities, you don't have enough troops to garrison them effectively. Letting you have your way is having a potentially hostile foreign power living in our back yard."

"We have a common goal. We will never attack GDI."

"And yet you apparently don't even respect our authority to deal with our own problems. For god's sake, man. It's not even harvest time yet.

If you attack now, the pirate-kings can just set those fields aflame and leave you to try and feed a starving population. No, wait, not you, WE get to try and feed an entire goddamn planet."

"I see." Al Aznar stroked his beard. "Would five months later be better for you?"

General Davis looked up dully. "Yes. Yes it would." That would be enough time to get some serious air power onto Antallos as a speedy counter to whatever the Azami might cook up. "If you say you're doing this for our own good, then you're going to have to follow our rules when it comes to peacekeeping and administration."

Ambassador Smith looked pensive. It was inevitable, that the Muslim population of Antallos would keep on ballooning until they were a significant power block. "I suggest a compromise."

"Yes?"

"Port Krin is getting crowded. Why not give the Free Azami an Autonomous Region where they can apply their own laws and live to their own rules, and then apply for CSN membership. Instead of taking over cities of people who might misunderstand, why not BUILD a new city?"

Al Aznar liked the sound of that. Antallos was a desert world much like Algedi, only milder. It would be trivial to adapt to their new home. "Do you understand, this is a far more serious plan than just a punitive takeover. If you invite us to stay, then we will remain, even hundreds of years later we will defend our home to the death."

"Lasting peace can only come with learning tolerance for each other. Together we are stronger, but not that powerful. Can the Free Azami learn to get along with House Kurita?"

Al Aznar chuckled. "A better question would be, can House Kurita learn to accept that we exist outside of their grasp?" He had no doubt it would end up being a bloody lesson.

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HINODE Primary Facility
Hakone Hyatt Hotel
Hakone, Japan
April 12, 2007/3022

The British East India Company was an example of a shipping company that started off with the intent of facilitating trade between an industrialized nation and 'wilder' regions, which to protect its interests exercising military power and assuming administrative functions, to the exclusion, gradually, of its commercial pursuits. They did not want another such company. The monopoly of trade routes, and the incredible political pressure it could thereafter exert, was too dangerous to be allowed by CSN and GDI. Not even the traders had any attraction to the idea; economy was a fluid concept, and a total monopoly was a vacuum that sucked in the growth of all around it. Unless there was some external source, as with the East India company the untapped and undervalued resources of the Mughal India and Manchurian China, a monopoly would have to provide stimulus to commercial interests around it to fuel its own growth.

That GDI exercised total control over all JumpShip traffic between Earth and Antallos stoked enough fear of a monopoly, only slightly soothed by that the Global Defense Initiative, being a military organization, could not engage in trade. Things had settled in Antallos, with major Inner Sphere powers expressing a willingness to open an exchange with the fledgling CSN.

It appeared that they had no choice; a new shipping company had to be established, if only to simplify the task of bidding for cargo space. The way it worked was that GDI chartered JumpShips, then assigned timetables and carry space over what they needed for their own military needs. That tonnage was then put up for bid. Earth had only so much lift capacity, and with all the many companies on Earth trying to expand into the interstellar market, it was vital to choose which ones were most likely to -help- economic endeavors rather than just draining the purchasing power of Antallos citizens for meaningless luxuries.

Someone had to serve as the middleman between CSN and the rest of the Inner Sphere. Antallos and Near Periphery Trading and Acquisitions Company was a venture of many different companies, and the fastest-growing item on the Stock Market. It was also one that was almost entirely owned by public shareholders. The way it functioned was similar to a catalog- products were printed on a items book and for both Earth and Antallos products. A part procurement company on Antallos, for instance, may be dedicated to the acquisition of Fusion Engines. Due to the -extremely- limited number of working Fusion Engines, the ANP-TASC would buy up nearly all of these and then conduct the auction on Earth; to short-circuit the four-month transit delay between the two planets and foil those trying to reserve products for which they may have no immediate use. On the return trip, items from Earth were sold to distributors at flat prices for bulk orders. The reasoning was such that while one middleman was a trust risk, at least by having it clearly monitored rather than a chain of facilitators, the transport markup would be kept at a reasonable rate.

ANP-TASC, otherwise sarcastically known as "A No Problem Task" had only one priority: to secure supply.

George Winston was the chairperson of the Columbus Group, a mutual funds company, which had inadvertently become Raizo Yamata's tool in collapsing the American stock market and kicking off the fortunately all-too brief second American-Japan War. That was one conducted mainly in two oceans, in the electronic sea of information exchange, and the other upon the more physical horizons of the two Navies and their strike aircraft. The public had soon enough forgotten the conflict, soon eclipsed by bolder and bloodier conflicts, and the status quo returned if with far less blind trust on both sides. George had not forgotten. He was tapped to help in the recovery back then, recognizing trick of the attack and worked through the loophole in pattern-reconition of stocks and the 'follow the leader' trend in the stock market, and it was that ability to take things in at a glance which perhaps returned him to the front of Jack Ryan's memory.

He had served as TRADER, the Secretary of the Treasury for Jack

Ryan's administration, and retired again by then. He could have been an advisor to the CSN Directorate on Trade and Economy, but that was a desk job more about finding political solutions than practical ones. It was Jack Ryan in his authority over CSN's DTE, and oh lord was he trying to keep from thinking of 'DirTE', that nominated him as chief mediator of the multinational trade initiatives. There were natural protests to his choice. Though he has served as SecTres, a stockbroker produced nothing, he simply leveraged economic forces separate from the physical and thus actually useful systems of trade and consumption. He worked with numbers, not material objects. In another sense however, it was entirely appropriate. Winston had no innate attachment to any specific industry, but rather to the overall purpose of the exchange- which was profit. In this instance, he had less incentive to amass profit margins; ANPTASC needed only enough to operate, weighed down by many different anti-monopoly measures. It was a challenge.

George rubbed at his face. DTE had given him a list of priorities, and on top of that was Fusion Engines. The slow trickle of market Engines from Antallos was not enough, many of the military manufacturers required a steady supply of Class 150, 175, and 200 Fusion Engines. The nearest source was the Outworlds Alliance.

It could all be George Winston's fault, really. Certainly he did not arrive on the Special Economic District with the expectation that success would ultimately doom the CSN. The group assembled from all over the world, and after a little show and tell session with HINODE, they had their few nights left on Earth to spend with the media and politicians. The welcoming dinner was the typical lavish affair, and he felt too old for such nonsense.

"This whole charade is an insult to the People." Yo Zheng, the Chinese ambassador muttered some distance away. "This trade mission is nothing more than a ploy to expose and indoctrinate poor and exploited people of the Outworlds Alliance to the Western Imperialistic consumeristic bull-trap."

"Sometimes you have to remember that the people of other nations are People too. They should get to live a fine and comfortable life if they choose." murmured Avel Alexeyev, a tall round-faced man who

would be going along the expedition. "Sour because China has no representation on this trip? What are you going to sell to them that will be useful for their growth? Umbrellas? Clothes? Mass produced trinkets and merchandise?" It was ironic that the bulk of China's exports were consumer goods. "At least we provide the gold for the exchange."

Yo knew better than to rise to the bait, for to take insult was to admit Chinese perfidy in trying to claim the Northern Resource Area for years now, instigating several major wars along the way. The Japanese were just one pawn in that, but while the PRC had enough size to temporarily disperse the financial consequences of failure they were also too big to be pulled up by friendly nations, as was 'the weak and domesticated toothless tiger of Asia', Japan. "We are not a nation of little merchants! We have mighty factories and machines. Our construction equipment are more that up to the task, much cheaper, and weapons will be of use defending their people's grain from pirates."

Alexeyev smiled thinly. "Any much cheaper and more rugged than ours, friend Yo? The OWA have their own Laser weapon plants, so you're ready to move into mass production with working duplicates?"

The ambassador snorted. He might not get much information from back home, but he was sure no one was anywhere close. He knew well as anyone why weapons were not up for sale in the trip. Not only was it bulky, or that it set a dangerous precedent, but that most Earth-made weapons remained inferior to IS guns. The export of targeting and tracking systems was a firm global taboo.

George Winston could not hear, but had a very good guess to the content of that conversation. The Japanese looked first to their own self-interest, but at least they sought no more than to uphold the status quo. The nineties was a bad spot for Japan, showing the flaws of their economic system that they had yet to fully recover from. 'It's all just bread and circuses again'. thought Winston. 'They're so desperate for this trade mission to work, they're putting all their cards in.' Strangely, that also made them the most dependable of his foreign allies. He held no grudges, for strangely enough the Japanese attempt to destroy the American market a few years back was the

very same event that brought him to Jack Ryan's notice, eventually as Secretary of the Treasury.

"And we simply cannot keep on buying up Engines from the open market?" asked Mitsubishi CEO Masahiko Seta. "Antallos Acquisitions has been most helpful. The class 200 Engines we required, we have eight of them now, six already mounted and functional."

"And how much is the markup? Can we be sure we'll have a supply when the Great Houses start to pull their shit?" he replied. "It's getting pretty obvious by now that we're hungry for Engines."

"Would not building our own factories here or Antallos better assure a supply of Engines when the Great Houses...or Comstar... do, as you say, 'pull their shit'?"

George chuckled. The older Japanese businessman's face did not flicker even by a hair while delivering vulgarity. "So you've been cleared for that eh?"

Seta nodded. The LAM project was trying to compress a hundred years of Star League research and development into months. The risks of failure were great, but success had its own perils. "Technology has been the doom and salvation of our entire civilization several times over, Winston-san. If at all possible we want to avoid another costly war."

"You can't though. When there's a hostile takeover out there, they start with cleaning the blood off the walls. Heh, they say we're bad because of our close ties between the government and the military, but their military-industrial-government complex out there is so deep in bed with each other it's practically incest." George shrugged. "To me it's enough if we get those OWA factories just to keep them out of the hands of anyone who wants to use them against Earth." he motioned over a waiter and had him carry a message. Soon after, a youngish man with a very proper bearing approached.

"Commissioner Sato, meet Patrick Clavering", who might as well be called his protegee. "Help out a couple of old guys here, why do we want to pull all our eggs in someone else's baskets again?"

Clavering nodded. "Earth's production capacity is very, very good, but its actual ability to produce is something else entirely. It's a tools to build the tools to build the parts sort of thing, sir. Even with the Star League memory cores, our scientists and engineers have barely cracked the riddle of the Fusion Engine. Simply, we don't have ANY Fusion Engine factories right now, much less for mass production of BattleMech and Vehicle Engines. It's much easier to build big in this case, than to shrink them, which is why the CSN accepted the proposal to focus on DropShip Engines."

"And we can't just buy factories, why?"

"Other than the needless complication and expense of moving? It would also mean just removing the deadlock several steps further back, as we'd need to import certain components from the Inner Sphere. Also, strengthening the OWA is to our benefit both diplomatically and as a buffer state to the Draconis Combine." At this, Seta gave an appreciative nod. "The only way to secure supply is to maintain control over every stage of the process- which means the already set-up production line in the OWA can produce Fusion Engines faster than buying them, disassembling them, moving them, rebuilding them, looking for parts, and then making the Engines at last. We will utilize the OWA's own contacts rather than serving as a competitor who will just alienate us from our closest and potentially best ally in the Periphery."

"The best way to get what we want is to go there and live there, is that right?" George finished.

"Yes, sir."

"We're going to have to deliver on the orders last time we were there, anyway." he mumbled. Something as high-profile as an interstellar trade agreement required the highest authority of the Trading and Acquisitions Company, and probably his first and only trip offworld before he gets too old to conduct such high-pressure negotiations.

"Farming and mining equipment, yes." The much younger man spoke with a posh Northridge accent. That he would have to stay over

there, in Alpheratz as the company liason, only added to the ironic echo of the East India Company. "The Recovery mission chose well, in sending trade items with lasting benefit. Too many applications to the TASC are about trying to offload mass-produced trinkets that have already saturated our own markets."

The useless knickknacks that so characterized modern civilization. It was like trading beads for Manhattan; and a lot of traders did not realize that there was more benefit in helping make a stronger, self-sustaining foreign market rather than bleeding it dry. Survival over profit; that was his job. "At least we can get the exchange rate licked." he groaned.

Sato gave a small bow of comisseration. Using the exchange rate of gold in the Inner Sphere, the rate was about three USD to one C-bill. In practical terms, specially when it comes to building large, complex things with mismatched tech sources (such as, say, the GM), the practical value was about eight to ten for one. A GM priced at 3.6 million C-bills were produced at a cost of about thirty-five million USD and a very, very narrow profit margin considering the billions already invested in HINODE and Hakone.

If war was pretty much inevitable, then it was just as inevitable that they'd have to poke their heads out of the hole to see how the rest of the Inner Sphere really lived. It would be dangerous. Such a trade mission was an irresistible target for pirates. He wondered if someone was hoping he'd get killed out there, for a chief executive officer that would be more willing to wrangle for profit margins. Fusion Engines were incredibly valuable, but if anyone had any idea they were setting off with some hundred tons of gold bullion and even blocks of -germanium-, the prize was insane. At the same time, it was a pittance compared to what GDI required.

George Winston looked out the window. Perhaps that was the point? The bloody English did have the experience in running a independent trade depot for the long term.

He looked around the brightly-lit gala. "Are your people even interested in keeping this a secret?" he asked the HINODE representative.

"The only way to know of our departure is if news somehow races ahead of time to Antallos. Since this party is just for counting the days until the JumpShip that will carry us arrives, that news will have to come with us as we Jump. The security hole is not here on Earth."

"It's your mercenaries I'm worried about." The trade mission was self-contained- the Skull Squadrons mercenary unit had Medium LAMs, some antique Star League fighters, and enough infantry to guard a site, had their own DropShips, and their friendly Tramp JumpShip with its three docking collars. The main contribution that the TASC provided was a third DropShip, a Union, and its contents. Since those mercenaries were stationed on Earth, and the JumpShip just inbound from Antallos, none of them had any prior knowledge of the mission or give away its destination. They would be safe from interception (barring a lucky guess by pirates) for the first two or three Jumps. He could take confidence of there being no advance warning, but since the mercenaries -were- part of the pirates, he had no idea just how reliable they'd be in combat.

Clavering nodded. "Unfortunately, we have no choice. GDI lacks any more free AeroSpace assets, and the new BearCat fighter is still in its test phase." BattleMechs that fall down could simply be hauled up to try again. An airframe disaster usually required building another test plane. "Even if pushed into production, it's far too light in armament if not using our missiles, and it's too soon to reveal its Stealth capability. That leaves us with Conventional forces. We do not have the transport capacity for too many vehicles or BattleMechs."

The old man rubbed at his face again. He could practically hear the outwardly reserved, but nonetheless completely enthusiastic young businessman Pronounce Capital Letters in the BT predeliction of JammedCapitals. "Well, I suppose it's too late to tell you it's not too late to back out now. Are you really ready to spend years away from..." he gestured around. "This? The OWA is advanced, but with with economy's crappy state, it's still going to be an uncomfortable five years. Business is business, but there it's going to mix with politics." It required flexibility in modes of thinking, not unforgiving precision.

"I feel that our globalization and the interconnection of economies has made it easier for most of us to forget the impact of our actions. This is an -excellent- chance to watch a closed economy grow back into self-sufficiency." He smiled thinly. "I know of the unfortunate implications, but this is a planned reversal of the old East India practices."

"In that case, the OWA should really set up shop on our shores." Winston shrugged again. "But then, they won't know to do that if we don't tell them it's okay to do that, right?"

"Right."

There was the danger for that monopoly too in affecting the OWA's own economy. "And obviously GDI can't control the OWA's own trade ships..." Winston mused further. ANP-TASC's Jump trade system was still in the middle of figuring out the protocols. "What we are is a precedent. We can't solve problems until we really know what they are." He supposed that was why CSN's DTE allowed his travel request, figuring the danger was worth his experience in dealing with rapid changes in the status quo. He glanced again at Clavering's carefully disinterested expression. The twitching of his fingers revealed the young man's impatience to get to long-dreamed-about space. Too many things that could happen; it was like walking into a trap just to see how much it hurts.

"What about you?"

Seta smirked. "Like you, Winston-san, I am too old to stay, expendable enough to make the first foray."

George laughed and raised his glass. "To first strikes and last chances."

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Settler's Sector
Port Krin, Antallos

June 9, 2007/3022

Or it could have taken its first step inside a typical day for Father Maximo R. Iglesias, which starts at 4 AM. Though Rome has sent several delegates, the small church of St. John the Baptist could only rely upon him. All he really had was extensive experience in dealing with poverty. In another, his was the most important duty. The 43-years old Castilian missionary searched for some coffee. The grains were from his own garden back on Sumatra. In a sense, his missionary work remained the same, only instead of contending with the greater mass of an Islamic population, he had to deal with widespread apathy. That there -were- Islamics in great number also now in Port Krin was just one more point of familiarity.

He poured several cups and waited for alarm clocks to ring. Jonathan Paige and Antonio Fabroni soon emerged, somewhat contrite at having their oldest member always waking up first, despite the privilege of years and hierarchy. "Busy day today, ah?" he asked mildly. Paige and Fabroni were more teachers than shepherds of the Faith. Secular education was still a sticking point. Many did not want to force children into prayer or put religious icons inside the schools. However, neither could CSN's Cultural Mission interfere with religious freedom and the right to choose, specially as many of the schools and shelters were funded and staffed by volunteers. The Azami's children still remained separate, and any hope of an integrated school system inevitably had to deal with stringent belief systems.

Later in the day would be an Interfaith Conference to discuss measures for communication, cooperation, and community. Antallos needed to become a true melting pot of cultures and creeds for it to thrive, an alloy and not just a mixture of jagged, competing edges.

"You should be speaking there, padre." said Fabroni.

Iglesias scoffed. "It is pointless to speak to those who will not listen. My message would be far too bitter to their taste."

Paige made a face and added some sugar to cool his cup. "So what

would you have us say?"

Iglesias shrugged. "That's not for me to decide. What is good for GDI or this city as a whole may not be good for the poor. It is they I'm concerned with, and my message theirs to hear or reject." He could just hear it, the age-old question: what do the poor deserve? What have they ever given for the good of the community? Strange as it may seem, even when they are the most numerous of the population, they tended just to drain the resources of their society. To many, aid to the poor just disappears into thin air. By their very nature, the urban peasants paid little to no taxes.

Antallos had population growth as its main driving force, now that the raid-based economy was out of the picture. Port Krin could only support so many people, and with a cap on people allowed to make the final step in the Hajj towards Earth, that meant those on the pilgrimage must find some gainful employment while they waited around Antallos. Naturally this led to friction with the populace, who wanted those same GDI-backed jobs.

The discipline and better educational level of the Azami had them taking up technical and managerial support serving Motherlode projects. It was bad enough that the foreigners were taking their jobs, they were ordering them around! The natives were restless. It was a powder keg of tensions and resentment, and open unrest would undo all the good that GDI had done. It was a troubling affair that seemed to have one inevitable, explosive outcome.

Some time later, there was a knocking at the back door. The day staff had arrived, crudely armed with bats and sticks. At their center was a young boy pushing a strolley with a steaming paper bag. The smell of fresh-baked bread filled the kitchen. "Ah, Yuuno." he greeted the young boy. "Thank you for the delivery. And the rest of you, let's eat."

The church helpers did not eat, not until they arrived. It was extra motivation to protect the bread. Sadly, it was also very good reason to get attacked, specially in the dead of night. Fresh bread was worth bloodying one's hands. Starvation in the city remained an everpresent danger even with the best of relief efforts. For convenience's sake, they could perhaps get the church's old oven working, but old Iglesias

believed in letting currency flow through the populace. A single coin could pass hands many many times as debts were paid and bellies were filled. A baker had to pay the miller, the miller the grain merchant, the merchant the farmer, and the farmer the shopkeeper. But Yuuno would now have to run back to the bakery alone, leaving the bread 'on credit' to be paid later in the day when it was safer. Perhaps the system wasn't perfect, but the kid was quick and could practically see in the dark with how used he was to running through dark alleys.

All of this just so he could get warm, fresh bread straight from the bakery. It was a humbling show of trust and regard from the community he wanted to serve. Antallos bread had that strange, nutty quality of Antallos gene-treated wheat. It was a strange aftertaste to his pan de sal, but Fr. Iglesias figured he had eaten stranger things, and he could learn to get used to this one too.

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There was a sizable crowd during the six o'clock Mass, which was heartening. They were there because they were fearful and needed his assurance as a pastor and a Motherloder, which was disheartening. There were not enough seats, and many stood outside in a crowd, just listening to the words of the Mass through the speakers.

"You feel under siege. There are these newcomers, to this world where you've suffered for generations, and just when things seem like they're getting better here they come along to take and sit on the rungs of what should have been your ladder out of the muck. You're afraid. You're just people, after all. You don't have guns, you don't have BattleMechs, if things get too bad they can always leave. But what about you? You're stuck here. If you rise up to attack, if you take the road of blood and unthinking violence, you would just paint yourselves as vicious, unreliable, and unemployable. You're confused. You're worked hard, you're ready to work harder. Why are they being so favored?"

You want to understand, but they are just so... different. There are those that say that no one can be called heathens any more, you all

worship the same God, or at least deserve the same benefit of the doubt, but how can you believe that makes them worth more saving than you who really need it? Maybe some of you are asking, what does God have to do with anything anymore? What do you have to do to get ahead?

My friends, I urge you not to let resentment rot your heart nor greed poison your minds. Recall that it was just not so long ago that you thought nothing could change anymore, that to succumb to evil and vice was the only way out of misery. And yet, here you stand, and your hope, though fragile, is something within you that will blossom into something greater. Though it may seem like it, it is infinitely easier to strive to do good, to fulfill your dreams through honest work, for the lure of evil is easy but the twisting trap of how much you must to do achieve, and attempt to escape the punishment for your actions, is a greater burden still.

I will not try to frighten you with tales of Hell and the peril of your mortal soul. Let me ask you this, then, what sort of world do you want your child to live in? Do you want it paid in blood and lies and betrayal? Such a world would only be illusionary, and the peace it brings all the more pitiful for when it finally cracks under the strain of self-deception, and paid back in double all the lives and all the good things that could have been, trampled for too few short moments of comfort.

Everything hurts. There's not enough food. The work is hard. You just want to be able to enjoy the fruits of your labor, is that too much to ask? It's not. But bandits are setting our fields to the flame, and inside the city the newer buildings are being claimed by those who have offworld money. How are you supposed to feel secure? And I will tell you this: the question has not changed. It was asked, in the time of the twelve tribes of Israel, it was asked by the sons of Jacob even as they plotted to have their brother be sold into slavery, and it was asked by many a family in wreckage of their homes after a war. The solution has **not** changed. It worked thousands of years ago, and it will work even now.

You must trust. You must LIVE. There are only two things you must do, as our Lord Jesus Christ simplified the ten commandments. With

these two you will live a good and happy life.

Love God and trust in His Work. Perhaps, after so much suffering, you think that if God is real then, if He even cares at all, then let Him at least not bother your daily life with disasters or raids or random violence. That was all you asked back then, right? Yet that is not what God asks of you! To live in despair is not living! You are people meant for more than just to move from day to day like animals! But as the old question goes, if God is so good why were you subjected to so much evil? How can you trust Him? How is God going to do anything for you?

What GDI has done is nice, but it's obviously also the flawed, if good-natured work of man. I will not claim our arrival here as a miracle and the cure to all your problems. But God provides. What is the worth of believing? It's not just being thankful for the universe being made, nor to chase away the fears of the future.

In the presence of God all our fears, all our wants, our hate, our despair, all of that... are just dust in the wind. You can become lost in the tempest of temporal concerns, in fleeting joys, in the greedy haste for position or glory, or become consumed in fear and the need for vindication. Our lives are given to us by God to do as we will, and though He points us the road to salvation it is our own choice to take it. Fear God, not because He is a puppetmaster controls man's destiny with crude yanks and pulls, but as a child who would forsake the warmth and guidance of his father's house just to indulge a foolish tantrum.

You can let yourself be blown along the current of misery and pointless gratification, or you can brace yourself against the rock that is God's grace, that is our Lord Jesus Christ. All the sorrows of the world, let it cover you. All the pain of living, all the misery of being flesh, let it all in. It is just rain. And let it go. Where there is God and man there is written a passage in the page of eternity.

We human beings weave our own story in the cosmos.

God builds us.

He has a plan for each of us and never gives us more than that which we are strong enough to overcome.

Even in the worst of times, that is where the spirit may shine the brightest, and even from suffering he builds us a better tomorrow. We are God's creatures. God gives us strength to accept that which we cannot change and the courage to change that which we can. We are freed from ego to think that we must force our way through things, no matter the consequences or whoever gets hurt. We are held up to attempt to do the right thing, despite our fears and our frailty. Where there is faith there is an infinite wellspring of patience and self-reliance.

To trust in God is not to become a mindless slave. It is to become the explorer of the wilderness, to strike out to distant lands, having all that you need on your backs and for whatever may come- God will provide. With trust you will have courage. It was not so long ago that you thought things could never change! Now it's changing again! Have courage! Accept change, grow with it! Rather than sit and let resentment fester, move to become part of that future. Don't let it leave you behind. With faith there is strength. You can endure, and in enduring grow strong. Strong enough to accept any burden, and ready to do what must be done. What is really the fuel of this feeling against the Muslim that have arrived? The fear of being pushed out? The anger at being given what is yours? But what makes you think it was yours to begin with? You do not -deserve- salvation, you do not -earn- it by suffering. You gain God's grace through -trust- and -faith-, and though I cannot speak for them, it is very likely that GDI's favor comes through perseverance and loyalty.

The second, is to Love Thy Neighbor. Who is thy neighbor? Need I recount again the parable Our Lord told of the Good Samaritan? Who was it that helped the fallen man of Judah in the end? Not the openly virtuous, not the wealthy, nor the wise in law, but the one against whose people the Israelites warred against time and again!

Who is thy neighbor but he that helps you when you are in need? And you are the neighbor to him whom you help. You are not a neighbor to those who you want to make your enemy! You are not a neighbor to those whom you would rather hate, and cast aside, than extend

your hands in welcome. You are living in the same city and you would rather be inside your own private world! And so inside that shell of self-delusion, fester! Inside that well of self-loathing, wither! Your pride- your envy!

Cast away these self-harming thoughts. It is idleness that brings misery. You are being held back by the unwillingness to trust in your fellow man. No matter how they look like, no matter what their faith, all human beings are worthy of respect.

After all, when GDI came to this place, they did not see slaves, nor backs ready to be broken in labor, but men and women worthy of freedom to decide their own lives. But freedom has its price, and that price is the terrifying freedom in itself; to know that only by your own power now can you survive.

You can't blame anyone else anymore.

If you let opportunity pass you by, it will. If you let suspicious cloud your judgement, then no one will trust you in turn. You are trapped by fear... a strange, irrational fear, of starving alone amongst those 'like you' rather than approach 'the other' and treat them like human beings worthy of your friendship. If you have faith in God, scorn will not move you. If you have trust in man, spite will not shake your resolve. You, they, this world, all can change.

Can't you feel it? It's happening! That is why you are afraid. You need those jobs, but they are at best a symptom of the greater disease. After all, if there are not enough employee slots in GDI, you are free to make your own jobs yourselves! If you do not have enough food, you have rooftops! There is the sun! There is the dirt! There is free water at the community well. Grow your own potatoes! It is pride! It is covetousness! You look upon those who live deep inside the Motherlode sector and feel for the day when such luxury is the norm for everyone. And indeed, someday, that will come. But you are just letting your greed get ahead of your arms.

Open those arms! Port Krin, and Antallos, is destined to become more than just another echo of fratricidal division. All men are brothers, but brother kills brother for the most stupid of reasons. Not here. This

is Antallos! Here we will have peace! Here we will have cooperation! Here we will respect each other, no matter the color of skin, of age, or parentage, or gender, or religion! We will buy peace at the cost of stupid pride! We will have peace at the sacrifice of short-sighted avarice! We will have peace by throwing away that part of us that is mindless, that is too easily tempted by violence, and filling it tolerance and perseverance!

We will have peace, because we are neighbors. True neighbors. Side by side, if we burn then we burn together. If we thrive, then we thrive together.

You are needed. This is YOUR planet. Whether or not it is a good place to live in, is in how you make of it. It is only your decision that can make it either a place of new beginnings and of futures free of shame or regret, or to let it be driven back by a repeat of the sins of its past, and let it fall into the shadow of hollow, pointless, destructive, self-serving, all-hating human malice. You can trust in God to give you the strength to give this world to your children, or ruin it for yourselves.

You want to know that you have not been forgotten. You need to know that you still have a chance to improve your place in life. And trust me, please, you haven't been forgotten. As we speak, more hearts and minds from the place you know only as "Motherlode" are preparing to come here to better help you shape this world into one that will accept anyone, that will let anyone become a part of its family, and grow stronger with every new voice. Wherever you come from, we are all human beings, and ours is an ancient battleground.

Here.

In the heart.

And every victory is God's victory.

God builds us to become better people, tempers and strengthens us with hardship, and with that a brighter universe.

I ask you please, do not falter. Not now, not when we're so close to

winning this. Trust in God, trust in Man, that the good inside us all still has a chance in this wide universe. You are the people of Port Krin, you are the people of Antallos! Only you have the power. You're stronger than this, don't let doubt... self-doubt... enslave your spirit now. Accept others into your family, and let your family become stronger for its unity. Embrace the change that God brings, and tomorrow, why don't we see what we can do next? The fears of today burn in the promise of the future.

In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, may you have peace. Oh Lord grant us your Wisdom and Mercy, that we may fulfill your Good Work.

Amen.

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Later that night, as the Interfaith Conference continued in full swing, two shadows slid from an alley. Two men, wearing dark clothing, carefully crab-walked up the space between the walls and broke into the old church's second story bedroom window. They crept into the room, their soft-soled sandals not making a sound upon the worn concrete floor. Their eyes glowed a faint green from special night-vision lenses. Very quickly they identified the parish priest's old computer.

Experimentally, they let it boot up. The sound of the hard drive grinding seemed too loud in the dark, and hurriedly one of them pulled the plug. The other whispered "A five hundred megahertz processor in something this small?" he muttered in disbelief, from his quick glance at the BIOS report.

"That means something this valuable would have valuable data." the other replied in a gravely voice.

Silently and using dull red flashlights, they prepared to take it apart.

The lights came on. The sudden shift in light levels had the intruders wincing.

"That won't be necessary. You can take whole thing, if you want." It

was just an old Pentium IV that he used for typing and the occasional access into the local GDI IRC network. "Besides which, I have a feeling that the information you want was never really about data."

The older agent groaned. He pulled off his mask, exposing a weathered face with a thick graying mustache. His younger colleague gasped in surprise, but with a look decided to follow suit. He took off his own mask, to expose a round, boyish face. "You were just seen at the conference." the older operative said, somewhat annoyed.

"Amazing what not speaking does for the success of the disguise." Fr. Iglesias tugged at his chin. "Most people see just the beard."

"How... it was empty when I looked." the younger operative muttered. Did GDI have some sort of optic camouflage? The habit that Fr. Iglesias wore, it looked like normal brown cloth.

"I was standing next to the window, under the drapes. Trust me, it felt as silly as it sounds."

The older operative rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "And you snuck up on us while the sound of this thing activating, and the glare of its screen... it distracted us."

Fr. Maximo Iglesias moved from the light switch to a nearby short cabinet. He picked up a tray with several large cups and a steaming pitcher of dark liquid. "Would you like some coffee?" Like any desert, Antallos nights were a chilling contrast to the day.

Deciding that it was pointless to try and poison or drug them at this point, the younger operative moved to the table. He smelled the aroma and nodded approvingly. "And what makes you think we want more than just data?" he asked the priest. "Perhaps you should come with us."

"And drag my dead or unconscious body out that window? It could be done, I suppose, but an unnecessary bother. This is a rather amateurish operation, but you don't look that inept as to ignore what security precautions are in place." Fr. Iglesias motioned to how willingly the older stranger drank from the cup. "You were sent here

to provoke a response." Much like upon encountering something utterly new to his experience, a child might poke at it with a stick to see how it reacts. "So here is my response. You want information. We want information. Would you consider a fair trade?"

Most other Intelligence services expected their operatives to blow off steam or try and live out normal lives whenever not called up to do their duty. Although occasionally they must do things to maintain their cover, it was impossible to simply stop being a Jesuit. The search for useful knowledge and the strict bounds of etiquette applied wherever they would go.

"My name... is unimportant. You could call me Miller." The older operative motioned to his companion. "This is Archer. You hold the advantage here, padre." How the strange and long-lost Catholic sect from CSN handled trespassers was also valuable knowledge; and whether or not they were handed over to GDI would show just how much (or how little) influence they held over the military.

Fr. Iglesias nodded. "My name is Maximo Ramirez Iglesias. He took out a fist-sized disk marked with an emblem of a fish. It was the papal seal. "Regimini militantis ecclesia."

'What an obviously fake name'. thought the two, though their own were just as opaque. "A bold claim." Miller answered carefully. He carefully picked up the disk and inspected it. "A very good reproduction."

"Almost as good as the real thing." Iglesias answered in the same even tone.

"My question then, if you really are of the Society, you must serve the Pope. Who is your Pope?"

"Benedictus Sextus Decimus of Rome. Yours?"

"Papa Leo Vicesimus Septimus of Rome."

"The Terran Church, then." Personally, Iglesias was more inclined to favor the Terran Church, if just because they were far less obvious

the political tool of the Davions. "Can you speak for the Church in certain matters of inquiry?"

"No. But if you are curious about... certain things... I have my own specific breadth of knowledge, and my young friend here has his own fields of expertise."

Fr. Iglesias nodded. The two were sent as unto sacrificial lambs, or goats tied to a stake to attract a tiger. The ludicrously straightforward burglary attempt gave a weak but legal excuse for interrogation. That Church that would throw away lives like this, it spoke two things to Iglesias. First, that the Church wanted to assure the newcomers of the veracity of their information and intentions. Second, that the Jesuits of the Inner Sphere had spread and become more callous through the hundreds of years.

"The Church has endured barbarians, schism, heresy, disinterest, even the fruits of its own arrogance. So why does it bow before Comstar?"

Of the many questions that could have been asked, that surprised Miller. "The Church was literally headless and crippled by Amaris. Jerome Blake brought with him the resources of the SLDF for rebuilding. There was nothing that could have been done at the time. As for today, Comstar is harmless. The Church does not bow before Comstar, but recognize secular authority and administration over the remains of the Terran Hegemony. Their praying to machines is silly, and such a rootless religious will eventually wither on the vine, unable to give man any answers to the eternal questions, but their apparatus for administration serves the people well enough. The Church, as you say, has endured. It will endure even more than just this, and must not interfere in secular affairs."

Fr. Iglesias nodded. He had expected as much. "Jerome Blake had good intentions, but Comstar has perverted those intentions. We have reason to believe that Comstar is not as harmless as it appears. The danger of the New Avalon Church is far less than the danger that Comstar represents."

"What are these reasons?"

"These reasons will become clear, in time. First, why has the Church seen fit to ignore the suffering of those cast down in war or held hostage by the marauders of the Periphery, in favor of its own doctrinal squabbling?"

"The grace of God is infinite, but not the ships nor the tithe of the faithful. We are helping those we can, and the Periphery is beyond even the might of the Great Houses to manage. We are humble enough to accept our own limits. Now what right does a little wayward Church, trying with some small success to help one city in one world, judge the hardship of a much vaster Church assailed by much greater forces over several hundred years?"

"We do not judge, but seek to understand. We also have certain other information available to us that sheds light on the problems facing the Inner Sphere. The technological and sociological decay that the Church fights against, is something more active than what you've been expecting. We do not blame the Church for failing to see what has been deliberately hidden."

"You still sound as if criticizing that which you do not even comprehend."

"Then I apologize. I will not ask you to blindly believe what I say, but there is a small favor our own Church wants to ask its brothers in the faith in the Inner Sphere." He slid over a plain book. Inside was a carefully collected and reformatted Battletech Sourcebook: COMSTAR. "Please use your own sources, and your own eyes, to confirm what is in this."

Miller nodded. "And your Church... the Vatican is ready to accept your people back into embrace of the faithful. Your work here in Antallos has been... admirable. We can be of much use to each other."

Fr. Iglesias shook his head. "It is too soon. There are certain other factors that complicate the issue. We have our own reason to trust in the legitimacy of our own Pope."

"How can your pope be legitimate without the approval of the Vatican?" he asked, curious rather than chiding. "But, just the two of

us can't decide anything."

Better to remain silent than speak words better left unsaid. Miller was starting to skim the pages of the book. Some of the words were highlighted with a bright green marker.

"I will carry your words to the proper ears." He paused, grit his teeth in anger, and suddenly shut the sourcebook. ".... and just how much do you believe that this timeline of events is in **any** way accurate?"

"It's up to you to verify its accuracy. For safety's sake, we're proceeding as if the worst in it have their roots in fact. We can do nothing until we have word as to the truth of this information."

Miller nodded and put the book into a pouch. It would not be too difficult. It was quite sensible, he had to admit. They already had people scouring for information that might end up being useful for the Society. There was disappointingly little that could help dampen the wars between the Houses. "And what do you intend to do in Antallos?"

"Here, with the assistance of GDI, we will halt the decay and try to reverse the decline of humanity."

"I am not convinced, but so far you're shown us little reason to stand against your plan."

"That is all we ask." Iglesias bowed slightly. "Ad maiorem Dei gloriam, brother." For the greater glory of God.

"Inque hominum salutem, frater." And the salvation of humanity.

They had work to do.

Comstar Compound
Hilton Head, Terra
July 9, 2007/3022

It could simply be blamed upon Myndo Waterly. She basically walked one day into the council with a shout of "The Catholic Church is trying to dig up information about us."

Everyone else there looked at each other with shared glances of long suffering. Myndo's paranoia was increasing by the day. "And so what if a neutered old organization tries to satisfy its curiosity? They will get nothing more than our prepared data, and besides... which one?" Primus Tiepolo asked with boredom.

"The Terran one! The one in your back yard!"

"Hmm. Still, while this is a strange happenstance, it is inconsequential. How do you know, anyway?"

Myndo sneered. "When they ALL suddenly stopped using our HPGs for transmissions. What remains are just too banal to describe. My people realized that no messages bore specific dates or locations. They've resorted to couriers for their more sensitive dispatches. The Churches, either of them, really have very little business sending so many messages to the Combine." Disturbingly, the messages were too close to the worlds near those garrisoned by Wolf's Dragoons.

"And how would you know THAT?" asked Precentor Jarlath.

"Oh, my people caught one of their couriers, killed him, and stole the message."

"Myndo!" Primus Tiepolo stamped his palms on the armrests of his chair and angrily got up. "You overstep yourself! This is-"

"Aren't you interested in what the message is and where it was going?" she asked in a too-sweet tone.

"Fine. I'll indulge your need for drama. What?"

Myndo looked triumphant. "The message was going to Antallos." she said loudly. And her next words were in a damning calm "And the message is: We have confirmed several of your suspicions regarding

Comstar. Beware that they too are interested in uncovering what you know." The uproar pleased her immensely. Unfortunately and unknown to her, the Society of Jesus had sent three messengers.

"Wait a moment. How was this message decoded? Surely no one would be so stupid as to leave it in the form of plain text."

Myndo looked sour. "Oh... it was a standard Wiseman cipher."

Precentor Kurtz raised his hand. "Forgive me if I'm wrong, but isn't that a Comstar cipher?"

"That just makes it worse! Someone is feeding these old fossils our secrets! And for what?!"

The First Circuit looked at each other. "This is a serious breach of our security. It must be examined. Thank you, Precentor Dieron." Primus Tiepolo intoned. "We will look into this problem most carefully."

"But what about Antillos and the GDI? Surely you're not going to ignore the destination of these messages? Something has to be done about this! If the alliance between Steiner and Davion ever gets wind of our intelligence service, Comstar's control over the Inner Sphere will vanish- like that!" she said with a snap of her fingers. "If none of you will do something about this, then I will!"

"Her fears -are- legitimate." Precentor Haakon reluctantly agreed. "We've been tracking GDI's purchases on the open market. It is consistent with someone attempting to mass-produce BattleMechs. It's not just the small factory the Combine leased to GDI, otherwise they should not be buying up so many Engines class two hundred and above. That speaks of someone seeking to build Heavy to Assault 'Mechs."

"Maybe we should -see- just how much lostech they have, before taking action." said another.

"So you mean we should prod GDI into action?" Myndo licked her lips. "That could be... possible."

"Within reason." warned Tiepolo. "Let's not waste too much resources in one little curiosity in the Periphery. The easiest way to disarm of whispers of Comstar's potency is not to give them a sign that we are hiding anything. Pretend the information is unimportant and it is more likely to be dismissed as someone else's forgery."

"So you don't believe GDI is the hidden source of the Wolf's Dragoon's lostech?"

"Their technology is advanced in some respects, very primitive in others. It is... unconvincing."

Myndo Waterly scowled. "Then I'll go see if we can find some more convincing proof!"

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**Outside Hermantown
Sea of Despair, Antallos
July 18, 2007/3022**

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Shivering slaves with shovels piled bloody, gaunt bodies into the side of a road. The pile grew, by the hundreds and then the thousands of the slaughtered and torn. A Firestarter 'Mech came by to set the heap of corpses aflame. It reached up to its knees. The scent of burnt flesh hung in the air for weeks.

In the very early morning a dark armored figure in a green motorcycle came by. Two small antennas rose from just above the brow of his full-face helmet in a V shape. He walked over to the collapsed pile of corpses and looked beyond to see a dozen more such small hills formed of human remains. The sourcebooks had very clearly underestimated the population of Antallos. There were several hundred thousand still left unreported, as nomads, as unregistered slaves and peasantry. They might as well not have existed, with how much anyone cared to double-check. The sourcebooks notes on

populations were apparently based on Comstar's reports, which in itself was used as a framing device for many books.

Reality demanded recognition. He bent down to pick up a skull. It was blackened beyond recognition, but clearly too small. It had still had clumps of long red hair, hanging down from his wrist. In life, perhaps it would have been to shoulder-length. A single playful braid was all that remained of several idle summers. The purging of Antalllos clearly began in blood, death, and fire. Slowly and gently he laid the girl's skull back into the makeshift pyre. He clenched his fists, and the large round eyes of his helmet glowed red in the gloom. It would end with fear, and pain, and revenge.

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Like threads coming together to become a string, many different desires and plans led together to make the Purging of Antalllos inevitable. Whether or not this would lead to a better world, was still up in the air. One world was still small potatoes in the ambitions of the Inner Sphere, but it was a spark in the darkness that was getting difficult to ignore.

Free Zones

Antallos

March 26 2007/3022

It is somewhat inevitable that some parents will carelessly name their children in such a manner as to force them to become qualified to enter UFC championships the moment they reach their majority merely to survive the attention of other children. It is also inevitable that some of these people will then join a military of some form. Compared to the likes of Sergeant Lovely and Seaman Guzzler, GDI Captain Boris Godunov hadn't have much to complain about in his early career, although he still wondered how the *hell* his parents had thought naming him after a famous Tsar could possibly have been a good idea in the Soviet Russia. Still, before joining GDI his difficulties had been confined to the jibes of the historically literate and opera aficionados. After transferring to GDI, it had somehow been universally decided that his facial features were vaguely reminiscent of a moose, and he had been stuck with the nickname of 'Bullwinkle'. What made this grate even more was that a British helicopter pilot had managed to become known as 'Badanov', purely on his lack of height and atrociously bad fake Russian accent.

This didn't have much to do with his present difficulties, but thinking about it was less damaging to his blood pressure than contemplating how exactly one of this tank crews had managed to contract a near-fatal case of food poisoning at a dive on the proscribed list the night before. To make matters just that little bit worse, his tank had suffered a massive engine fault that only made itself known just that morning. On asking the maintenance chief how long a fix would take, the sarcastic bastard had dug a kazoo out of his cargo pocket, and started mournfully in on a rendition of Taps. So he found himself moving towards battle this morning, in a tank whose sole virtue was that it was still capable of moving under its own power, swearing that after its crew got out of the infirmary would be spending the entirety of their extra duty making the entire company's vehicles *immaculate*.

With an effort, he forced his thoughts away from pointlessly seething about the debacles afflicting his unit, and resumed contemplating the

military situation. The opposition was reported to be in near regimental strength of mechs, although fortunately without any conventional support worth mentioning. Opposing them were the two battalions of mechs in the GDI regulars, along with three full tank battalions, and significant infantry, artillery, and helicopter support. The satellite coverage the Expeditionary Force had come to depend upon had been eliminated, and so they were forced to rely on their dwindling numbers of recon drones while waiting for the next resupply run to arrive.

As if summoned by his thoughts, one of the Predator drones chose that moment to sweep in towards the target area. He was unable to stop himself from saying "Bozhe Moi" as his terrain map automatically updated to reflect the changes wrought upon the land. Where it had previously been a wide valley of clear ground with a slight uphill slope, now the entire area showed signs of deliberately having been ravaged, with both heavy earth moving equipment and targeted weapons fire. While it was by no means impassible, progress would by necessity slow to a crawl when crossing the torn-up ground, which stretched for miles. To cap it all off, at the end of the no-man's land a network of trenches could be seen stretching into the distance. The scale of the trenches wasn't immediately apparent, until a *Rifleman* arose from one, with its legs still completely hidden. Half a heartbeat later after pulsing its active radar, it dropped below visibility, as a *Jagermech* emerged from an entirely different line to shoot down the drone with a single burst from its autocannons.

"You know Captain, they've put so much effort into area beautification that I'd hate to waste all the effort some poor other soldiers had to go through. I say we let them keep the place." As always, his driver, Anton Smirnov was ready with a quip to make light of the situation. His gunner, Andrei Lebedev merely grunted in response, which by his standards was practically a monologue. A moment after he spoke, another drone made a low level pass, nearly making it a third of the way across the trench lines before being brought down. Artillery fire followed, but without direct observation was unlikely to be accomplishing much of anything against enemies this professional.

Captain Godunov withheld comment as he attempted to keep the

entire situation in his mind. Two of the tank battalions had been detached down other valleys in an effort to flank any defenders, along with a detachment of IFVs to support each. Supplying them with mech support had been considered, and then rejected, since a twelve meter mech would be infinitely more visible than a three meter tall tank. At the same time, the attack helicopters of the air cavalry moved up behind cover to bring the defense line within range of their Hellfire missiles. Meanwhile, the two battalions of mechs along with the first tank battalion that he was part of were moving straight up the middle to fix the defenders' attention.

A concerted sweep of multiple Predators at various altitudes and approach angles was attempted, provoking the eruption of a blistering energy storm from the trench line as the drones made their passes. He was reminded of a Japanese cartoon he'd seen on the trip from Earth, where a floating mountain seemed to cut loose at the heroes with what should have been enough lasers to supply Earth's military needs for the next decade. Unlike that cartoon, these lasers weren't completely ineffectual though, and once again direct observation ceased with the destruction of the last drone.

Still, in their passing they had confirmed the presence of at least a reinforced battalion in the defensive line. The remaining drones were reallocated to ensure nothing could approach the attacking forces to attempt an ambush, while the infantry left in the rear pushed out their defensive bubble to ensure that nothing could get within fifteen kilometers of the brigade command tracks and artillery positions.

Aside from minor adjustments, everything proceeded smoothly as the main assault force approached the standard effective range of Battletech weapons. There was a moment of tension as the force crossed into light autocannon range of the trenchline, hitting the edges of the rough terrain at the same time. The defenders declined to act though, and two minutes later the captain tensed up again as they crossed the line into long range missile range. Still there was no response, and another two minutes passed as they continued to approach.

The voice of Colonel Chou Kurita came over his radio "Shift to Bravo Three" Just as the revised set of movement orders confirming that command began to appear on his IVIS, a blast of incoherent radio noise was transmitted from the trench line. At that point everything began to happen at once.

A massive flight of LRMs erupted from the trenches, seemingly aimed at nothing in particular. At the same time, fifty mechs rose so that their upper bodies were visible, and unleashed a single volley on a mere three targets. Despite the range, all of their targets were destroyed, and Captain Gudonov hissed in disbelief as the icons for all three battalion commanders with the main force disappeared. Simultaneously, the ground erupted behind the two flanking forces, and a full company of mechs began blazing away at the tanks in each location. Designating a target, he said "Company target, fire" on the net, and saw at least half a dozen shots impact a *Thunderbolt* before it could fall back into cover.

"All units engage at will. Artillery focus on-" The transmission from the Force commander cut off as far to the rear, from at least seventeen kilometers away, laser fire began hitting the command vehicles and artillery batteries. Seconds later the LRMs salvos began to fall with devastating on the positions of the Apaches that had thought themselves invulnerable behind cover, as they desperately abandoned their planned fire mission and began evasive maneuvers.

IVIS literally froze for a moment, as the sheer number of command units eliminated near-simultaneously sent it into an error loop. A second later it stabilized with an Infantry Battalion commander as the new force leader, whose voice came over the radio saying "-dismount I repeat all units dismount! shit, Apaches evade and attack the-" breaking up into a burst of static as a second volley lashed out, momentarily crashing IVIS again. The flanking forces desperately tried to come about to present their front armor to their attackers, even as they smoothly split apart to ensure a flanking shot on at least some of the tanks. The force in the trenches popped up from new firing positions, removing the senior company commanders of the three battalions still attempting to advance. The *Blackjack* Boris targeted dropped back early, and was only hit by two rounds.

"Yob Tvoyu Maht" He said in disbelief, as the third avalanche of fire removed the next line of command. "Battalion, take your shots from my vehicle feed, time their shots, and dig yourselves fighting positions in between" he said, adding to his gunner "Andrei pick your own targets as long as they leave us alive" The tank battalion's cannons roared as one as he finished speaking, smashing a *Wolverine* into the dust, as the tanks began spinning in place to dig their own defensive positions. Across the battlefield the slaughter continued, if less one-sided now that the Expeditionary Force was beginning to regain its bearings. The source of fire in the rear was revealed to be a company of fast mechs, that began playing tag with the belatedly responding infantry.

Another second passed, and the command icon settled firmly on Captain Godunov's tank. He immediately began issuing orders "Apaches engage your best targets on the flanks with Hellfires then close with cannon. Mech forces close with all possible speed. Infantry"- another volley hammered at his forces, and he cringed for a moment, before realizing that another tank had been hit instead, and continuing "take out those damned raiders". In actuality, his orders were fairly basic and in some ways entirely obvious, but the simple fact that a commander was living long enough to give them helped steady the troops as they began to exact a measure of revenge. Still, the situation was extremely grim, if the other forces couldn't whittle down their opposition, he knew that his tanks simply didn't have enough ammunition to kill all of the enemy mechs on the field. His tanks' cannons spoke again, hammering a *Rifleman* flat, as the *Wildcat* volleyed its Hellfires to eliminate a *Griffin*, but the return salvo wiped out an entire lance in exchange.

Captain Boris Godunov gritted his teeth and prepared to see the battle through to the bitter end.

Free Zones

Antallos

March 28, 2007

Captain Boris Godunov sat on the hull of his tank, which had finally succumbed to the poor maintenance of its original crew, taking a long pull from his canteen and waiting for the combat recovery vehicle. Shortly he would have to return to Port Krin for another endless round of reports and deconstruction of his field performance, not to mention to prepare for the potential fallout of the arrival of more hopefully friendly forces that had cut the planned exercises short, but that was for later. Right then all he wanted was to feel the breeze on his face after far too long stuffed inside his tank.

The first day's exercise had, rather predictably, ended in a defeat for the good guys. The situation had simply been impossible to redeem, especially since it turned out that a number of the OPFOR's mechs had played possum, shutting down their reactors after being hit, and waiting until the surviving mechs had reached close range before reactivating and tearing them apart. Still, that exercise had in some ways been a gimme for Colonel Alladin Al Hazim, since Chou Kurita knew damned well that he had no business attempting to manage a major ground battle.

The second day, with the force under the command of one of the line battalion commanders, had gone even worse though. In an understandable reaction to the previous day, he had pulled all his forces in tight, which allowed the Legion to manage a Thunder Run straight through the base camp. That had been expensive in the extreme, costing them more half their numbers, but had wiped out the entirety of the conventional vehicles supporting the GDI regulars. They also eliminated every company grade officer in the Battlemech battalions, and their lack of an experienced commander, combined with the Legion's superior individual skills, proved fatal when they attempted to pursue.

The third day, General Davis had taken personal command, and

decisively kicked the Legion's behinds around the Free Zones. While losses had still been heavy, there was no doubt that there was still a coherent field force remaining. The Russian found his musings interrupted by the approach of a group of *Battlemasters*, one of which came to a halt next to his tank. Its canopy popped open, and the familiar form of Major Dansel began fast-rappelling down the side, neatly touching down on the tank's deck. Detaching the rope from his harness, he said "Hale said to tell you nice work on that clusterfuck we hit you with." Seeing Godunov's obvious disbelief, he said "Well, yes, he did say that there were three different ways you could have handled it better in that exact situation. But since he offered to take the time to explain them to you personally in detail, it means he thinks you did well enough that there's hope the lesson will stick. Now that it's all over with and the General proved he can read us like the Cliff Notes of See Spot Run, got any questions?"

"So, you tagged our command vehicles before the shooting started. I get that sir, it's the only way you could pick them out like you did, and explains why you missed mine when it deadlined. I'm guessing that you used your support staff and security detachment with landlines to give you our Apache's locations and the flanking groups for indirect fire. And Chicago should have taught us not to take the ranges of mechs for granted. What I'm not getting is how the hell you built a mech-scale replica of Verdun, complete with the effects of years of shelling, much less buried two full companies. Not in the time you had, and I checked, the Industrialmechs of Port Krin haven't mysteriously gone missing."

"Oh, that." Keying his radio he said "Brox, show off my shiny new toy for the captain" Another *Battlemaster* approached, and reaching behind Dansel's machine, pulled at something concealed from view to the accompaniment of loud metallic noises. Coming around into clear view, it was revealed to be holding a mech scale shovel.

Hearing the noise, Anton Smirnov popped his head up from the hatch, took in the tableau, nonchalantly said "Aah. Crazy Spetsnaz Mech, run for your lives", and dropped back down to resume his nap.

"Not all the mechs have hands, or even arms, but we're working on attachments for them. Mechs don't get tired, and most of our RTOs

can at least pilot them well enough to use a shovel indiscriminately, so we were able to work pretty much constantly through our preparation period. And, of course, we left the burying for last. I honestly wasn't sure we'd be able to pull that off and conceal our work in time, but that part was the Colonel's brainchild."

Godunov processed this for a moment, before saying "Sir, tell Greene he wins our bet. You are crazier than him."

United States Naval Base Guantanamo Bay
Guantanamo Bay, Cuba
Earth, Grantville Cluster, Periphery
April 6, 2007/3022

"You've been properly briefed regarding procedure here, correct?"

The question broke the steady sound of footfalls that Major Andreas Staedele of the Buron Cavalry was concentrating on as he walked down the hallway of the rather spartan prison complex. He had been trying not to let his mind race over the myriad number of thoughts that pulled at him due to finally being granted access to a man who claimed to have been a former member of the Black Lightning Raiders just prior to joining up with Vorax's invasion force. It was finally time to discover what the man had to say regarding the disappearance of astech John Cody's father, Brevet-Leftenant William T. Cody of the 8th Syrtis Fusiliers Auxiliaries, during the pirate raid on the planet Kesai IV.

"I have," Andreas responded calmly with a nod to the man walking next to him.

"Good," the special agent commented neutrally, his eyes hidden behind a pair of dark glasses. "Then I don't have to remind you that everything that occurs in the interrogation room is both visually and audibly recorded and is admissible as evidence in a court of law."

Andreas nodded again, though he felt a small chill run up his spine as he sent a quick glance to his companion. The man had introduced himself to Andreas as soon as Staedele had boarded the plane to Cuba. About five feet, ten inches tall with a distinctive widow's peak to his auburn brown hair Special Agent H.W. Smith did not appear to be too spectacular in his simple black suit and tie. However, Andreas's experienced eye said different. The man walking next to the leader of the Buron Cavalry was the quintessential 'Man in Black', seemingly apathetic to anyone and everyone while still holding an incredibly dangerous air about him, an air reinforced by the significant bulge just beneath Smith's left shoulder, a bulge that belied the carrying of a rather large pistol.

Coming to a stop before the door that would lead into the interrogation room where the prisoner was waiting Smith turned slightly saying, "Major, I would like to remind you of something before we go in and you are introduced to the man you are so eager to meet. Do not get your hopes up. Regardless of your interest in him the man is still a criminal and as such you should not take anything he says at face value. Also, whatever information he may give us will need to be verified before it can be acted upon."

Nodding his head slightly in understanding as his life as a mercenary had led him to deal with individuals of 'questionable' integrity before, Andreas followed Smith into the room. Seated already behind a simple metal table was a rather haggard faced man. Wearing a bright orange jumpsuit with black numbering on it the man was rather gaunt and wiry looking with black hair parted slightly off center and a few days worth of stubble covering his chin and jaw. The other thing quite noticeable about the imprisoned pirate was the fact that the left sleeve of his jumpsuit hung loose and empty from the shoulder down. The man's remaining arm was chained at the wrist and linked to a chain that circled his waist before disappearing beneath the utilitarian metal table. Andreas easily recalled from the dossier he had read on the flight that the man had lost his left arm when he had made a messy ejection after his Mech had been destroyed by the Firebrands during the Invasion.

"Ah, Mr. Anderson, we meet again. I was almost beginning to miss you I think," Agent Smith noted stoically as he and Staedele both took seats on the opposite side of the table, the suited special agent pulling out a large manila file from his suit jacket. "I had thought that our little chats were done and over with, but it seems that is not to be the case."

"Fuck off, I got nothing to say to you," the man known as Anderson spat back, "Fucking ass-wipe."

"Oh, but that isn't true Mr. Anderson," Smith commented, his voice not wavering or showing any sign that the man had noticed the slur against him. "You have plenty to still tell us and today I have brought a special guest to listen to you. Major Andreas Staedele, may I

present to you Mr. Thomas Anderson."

"Staedele?" Anderson questioned slowly before his eyes widened in recognition. "I've heard of you! You're a fucking traitor, siding with these fuckers over your own damn kind!"

Frowning slightly at the accusation Staedele responded sharply, "I would hardly consider myself or any of my people to be anything like you, Mr. Anderson. The Burons may be mercenaries, but we still hold ourselves with pride, honor, and dignity. The same can not be said for pirates like yourself."

"Yeah, well fuck-off...the both of ya!" the orange jumpsuit clad prisoner yelled. "I ain't gonna say shit to either of ya so get the fuck out."

"Ah, but you will talk to us Mr. Anderson and you will tell us what we want to know," Smith said, his tone remaining stoic as he addressed the rather angry prisoner. "If you don't then I am afraid that I will have to reintroduce you to some of the pastimes you have already become well acquainted with since you began your stay at this facility."

Paling slightly the incarcerated pirate stuttered, "Y-ya...ya can't do that."

"Oh?" Smith responded, the small upturn in the right corner of his mouth the only sign of his amusement at Anderson's response. "And what makes you think that? You see Mr. Anderson you seem to be confused somewhat about the position you are in, so allow me to enlighten you."

Hearing Smith speak in such a calm and collected manner Staedele sat back in his chair slightly. He had followed, as best he could given the circumstances at the time, the legal wrangling concerning the prisoners taken during the Invasion of Earth; he had to considering that the future of his own Buron Cavalry had been uncertain at the time as well.

"You see Mr. Anderson, you engaged in a willful and brutal attack not

only upon this planet, but upon the City and Country of Los Angeles in the State of California and thus the United States of America itself," Smith stated calmly. "You are not a soldier by any legal definition recognized by my government. You are, at best, a terrorist. However, despite your current standing we are preparing a fair and legal military tribunal for you. A tribunal that will examine, in detail, your actions upon landing and throughout your rampage through both the City and County of Los Angeles. I can assure you, Mr. Anderson, that we have more than enough evidence to hang you with."

Staedele remained silent as Smith spoke. In the briefing he had been given prior to arriving at the prison facility he had seen the battleroms taken from not only the Mechs of several members of the Firebrands, but also from Anderson's own *Cicada*. The footage clearly showed that the man had destroyed several civilian housing structures and used the 40ton Mech's lasers to kill civilians who had fled those buildings or been unlucky enough to be caught out in the street. Watching the footage of men, women, and even children who were only fleeing in terror being vaporized by Medium and Small Laser fire had made him sick. He wasn't unfamiliar with such acts, he had seen such things repeatedly over the years in his fight against forces of the Draconis Combine. However, just because he had seen such actions before did not mean that they still didn't earn his ire, make his stomach turnover in knots, and cause his blood to boil. Men like Anderson were all too common nowadays, in both the Inner Sphere and the Periphery. One of the greatest hopes Andreas had was that the GDI would be what turned the tide against such barbaric behavior, even if many of the people of Earth were rather naïve in their innocence regarding the costs of warfare.

"Y-yeah right," Anderson stuttered, trying to appear unaffected by the threat and failing miserably in doing so. "Y-you can't do that to me... or any of us here. I heard that we're going to be turned over to someone else...to some other court outside your control."

Staedele had heard such rumors himself shortly before leaving for Antallos and then again upon returning to Earth. One would have thought that such things would have been settled by now, but then this world was full of surprises and contradictions. The legal issues on Earth were a rather messy tangle of jurisdictions and various rights.

He had gotten a headache just trying to figure out where his own Buron Cavalry stood after he had finalized their contract with the United States. It wouldn't be good if they were deployed by their employer to a place where they could suddenly be arrested because their employer's ally did not hold to the same contractual and legal principles.

"You refer to the International Criminal Court at the Hague, Mr. Anderson," the black suited agent stated in a way that made Andreas almost think that the man was actually amused for once. "I can assure you that you can put such rumors and thoughts out of your mind. My government is not a member of that body and thus has no obligation to turn over either you or any of your fellow pirates that we captured attacking us. While my government has received political pressure to turn you and your fellow prisoners over to the ICC for prosecution and as a gesture of solidarity and good faith, I can assure you that it is quite unlikely to happen. The reasons for this are numerous and quite a bit complicated, but I will try and simplify them for you. The first is that you attacked us in a blatant act of terrorism and the United States of America, especially our current leadership, does not take kindly to such actions. Second, your crimes were not only committed in the United States of America but also in the City and County of Los Angeles in the State of California. There was some debate as to if you should be tried in a California Court, but it was decided that it would be doubtful that you could receive a fair trial in such surroundings, not to mention that as a terrorist you fall more under the purview of the military and the Federal Court System. This actually brings me to my final point. You see unlike a number of our allies, the United States of America does believe in the usage of capital punishment for certain crimes, murder and terrorism being at the top of that list. In fact that was one of the conditions that the Governor of California specified in order for him and his Attorney General to drop their disputes over jurisdiction. They wanted to make certain that when you and your cohorts face sentencing that the death penalty remains not only on the table, but is fully and judiciously applied."

Andreas felt himself smirk slightly at Smith's words. He did not understand why so many people on this world were so squeamish about using capital punishment. Did they not fully realize what the

rest of the universe was like? Did they think that this was all a game, that there weren't very real consequences out there awaiting them for both their actions and inactions?

"Honestly I'm rather surprised you'd even bother giving scum like him a trial," Andreas spoke up, openly voicing his opinion further on the matter. "Considering the overwhelming evidence you have against him and the others he'd have been executed for his crimes within a week or two after committing them on any other civilized world... that is if the squad that captured him didn't decide to help ensure justice's expediency themselves."

"That may be true Major, but we try and hold ourselves to a higher standard here," Smith remarked calmly, his eyes still hidden behind his dark sunglasses, though once again Staedele thought he almost sensed a hint of grim amusement from the man.

Slightly paler at the implication that his life hung in the balance Anderson spoke up slowly, "Wha...what would I get...in return I mean?"

"That depends upon how forthright you are with us and how useful your information is. Should you prove to be a valuable information source then we would want to keep you around for the foreseeable future," Smith stated, his voice remaining as calm and stoic as ever. "You will never be a free man again Mr. Anderson, of that I can assure you. However, should you prove to be cooperative with us then you will find your imprisonment to be much more tolerable to say the least. It is your life that hangs in the balance here Mr. Anderson and as I see it you have two options laid out before you. One leads to you living out the natural span of your life behind bars, the other leads to a seat in a small chamber and a set date on which you shall meet your Maker."

Sitting there in the interrogation room Andreas Staedele felt the silence weigh heavily on them all before Anderson nodded his head. Even though only a few seconds had passed the Major did not doubt for an instant that for the imprisoned pirate the weight of the decision must have made time crawl by agonizingly slowly.

"If I tell ya...if I tell ya what ya want to know then I get to live, right?" Anderson asked, fear easily detectable in his tone. "Ya...ya won't...."

"I can assure you Mr. Anderson that if you accept the deal then your life will be spared and that will not change; once a deal is made and accepted then it is pretty much inviolate," Smith said as calm and collected as usual and yet menacing all the same. "Any deal made here will be recognized by the Attorney General of the United States and the Federal Court System. You will of course have to agree to certain terms regarding pleading guilty to your crimes, but that is something for another day. I will, however, stress to you that though your life will be spared any further benefits are all conditional upon you being completely honest and forthright with information that we require and suspect you of possessing. Should you, at any time, lie or conceal information from us then you will find what few comforts we provide for you shall be immediately stripped away and the full weight of prison life shall be allowed to grind you into paste under its immense weight. Are we clear on that Mr. Anderson?"

Taking several tries Tom Anderson finally found the ability to swallow the lump that had seemed to form out of nothingness in his throat before nodding his head in understanding and compliance.

"Very good," Smith noted, "Major, I believe you have a few questions for Mr. Anderson at this time?"

Nodding slowly Andreas spoke, "You were a member of the Black Lightning Raiders, were you not?"

"Yeah, I was," Anderson replied tersely.

"It was noted in a previous 'interview' with you that during your time with the Raiders you participated in the attack on Kesai IV," Andreas continued, ignoring the curt reply he had received in response to his first question. "It was also noted that when you were describing the raid on Kesai IV you mentioned running into the 8th Syrtis Fusiliers Auxiliary and one Brevet-Lieutenant William T. Cody. I want to know about Lt. Cody. I want to know what happened to him, where he is, and how I can find him."

Tom Anderson, former mechwarrior and pirate, did not immediately respond. Sitting in his chair the one armed man was silent for several moments before he began to fidget ever so slightly.

Being an experienced leader Major Andreas Staedele knew how to read people's body language. It was how he had been able to first realize that young John J. Cody had not been initially telling the truth during his interview to join the Buron Cavalry. Right now, with the way Anderson fidgeted and refused to make eye contact, Staedele was suspecting that the imprisoned man had something to hide.

"If you don't tell us what you know then things are not going to be in your favor, Mr. Anderson," Smith interjected calmly, the Special Agent having picked up on the same signs that Staedele had noticed. "Your deal does not go into effect until this interview is concluded to our satisfaction. I suggest you tell us what you know and do so now."

Looking rather nervous, the few remaining traces of defiance having completely disappeared, Anderson spoke up, "Well ya se...I...that is to say...what I mean is...."

"Out with it already," Smith ordered, his tone still remaining calm and collected.

"Well I...I participated in the raid just likes I told ya. Me and the Raiders dropped onto Kesai and we tore the place up," the imprisoned pirate began, a hint of pride making its way into his voice despite his overall edginess. "We encountered a battalion of them Fusiliers there and we walloped them but good I tell ya. We hads them running every which way and...."

"I don't really care about that Mr. Anderson," Andreas interrupted the man, "I want to know about Cody. I was told that you encountered a man named William T. Cody, a Brevet-Lieutenant in the Fusiliers who piloted a *Centurion*. I want to know about him. We can save the full recounting of the battle for another time."

"Yeah, sure.... Well ya see, I didn't really meet him," Anderson responded slowly, "One of the other lances did. I heard it over the

radio. They bushwhacked a Fusilier lance led by a *Centurion*. They whooped them good and they took the Mech as salvage. They walked it right off the field."

"They simply walked it off the battlefield?" Staedele asked with a hint of confusion in his voice.

"That's what I just told ya," Anderson replied quickly.

Hearing that, Andreas chewed the lower lip of his mouth for a moment in thought. It wasn't uncommon to salvage Battlemechs and other equipment from a battlefield. Heck, it was how the majority of the military forces within the Inner Sphere and Periphery were able to continue being able to fight, what with how production of new Mechs and equipment was in poor supply except for the most elite House units. However, what was odd was that Anderson was saying that the Raiders had been able to walk the *Centurion* off the battlefield. Having salvaged Mechs walk off the field under their own power was a rare occurrence seeing as how after a battle even the best salvage was usually pretty badly hammered. Normally one would simply grab what salvage one could and simply drag it off the field, in fact the Burons had done so themselves in the past. It was one of the reasons why Mechs with actual hands were so common. Using those hands meant one could recover salvage and move equipment far more easily and far faster, it also meant that a Mechwarrior didn't have to wait for the techs to come out and hook up tethers and lines in order to drag the salvage off. Walking a Mech off the field meant that the Mech had either been a) captured in incredibly good condition, b) the techs had spent the time necessary to repair the salvaged Mech enough for it to be piloted off the field, or c) the Mechwarrior had surrendered while still in the cockpit and either allowed the enemy to remove him from the cockpit and walk the Mech off or the pilot had walked the Mech off the field himself under the orders of the enemy.

"What of Lt. Cody?" the leader of the Buron Cavalry asked, a bad feeling beginning to well up in his gut.

"Well I heard that he came along for the ride after some convincing, if you know what I mean," Tom Anderson remarked with a faint

smirk. "The guys that got him and that *Centurion* were really happy 'bout it too. Wouldn't shut up 'bout it and for good reason."

"Good reason?" Andreas inquired, unsure what to make of the remark.

"Yeah," the imprisoned pirate noted, grinning just enough to show his teeth. "The Lady loves it when we get her prisoners. She rewards us more for them then she does for Mechs, especially if they look to be people who might know things."

Staedele was quiet for a moment in thought. What Anderson was saying wasn't that unusual. Taking prisoners was a common practice for pirates. If a captured person was important then the pirates would often try and ransom him or her, though the more common practice was to simply sell prisoners into slavery as that was one of the more lucrative businesses in the Periphery...and even in Draconis Combine and Capellan Confederation. The thing that gave Staedele pause, however, was that Anderson was saying that prisoners were worth more then Mechs. That in and of itself seemed to be a contradiction given the very nature of the universe as Andreas and everyone else in the Inner Sphere and Periphery knew it.

In the 31st Century life was cheap, Mechs weren't. No commander would ever pay more for prisoners than for proper salvage. Granted, there were a few individuals out there that would be worth far more than battlefield salvage, but such individuals were exceptions to the rule. There was no way that Lt. Cody, a brevetted officer originally from a Capellan March Militia unit, was such an exception.

"Why would you get rewarded more for prisoners than for salvage?" Staedele asked, honestly curious about it.

"Don't know," Anderson replied with a small shrug. "What can I say? The Lady likes her prisoners. Heh, in the Raiders we got us a pot going on what she does with them. Though with me being in here it looks like I ain't ever going to be able to see if I won...let alone collect on it if I did win. Too bad too, I had 200 C-Bills on her using them for some sort of crazy sex orgy or fetish of hers...heh, heh."

Anderson chuckled darkly for a moment. It wasn't quite clear if the man was laughing at the thought of what the prisoners could be used for or if he was laughing at his own expense due to his current and future predicament.

"Mr. Anderson," Smith said, cutting into the low chuckles from the imprisoned pirate. "This...Lady, was it? You didn't mention her before. Who is she exactly, the leader of the Black Lightning Raiders perhaps?"

"Heh, got it in one," the one armed man confirmed. "She's the head honcho alright."

Writing something down in the folder he had before him Smith continued, "Does she have a name? Or is she just called 'The Lady'?"

"Oh she's got a name alright," Anderson answered, a somewhat pleased tone entering his voice. "Star Captain Anya Rosse is her name."

Hearing the name did not ring any particular bells for Staedele. However, the Major did notice that Smith had paused in his writing.

"Captain Anya Rosse?" the Special Agent asked, his voice still as stoic as ever.

"No, it is *Star Captain* Anya Rosse," Anderson corrected, putting emphasis on the rank supposedly held by his former boss. "She ain't a Captain, she's a *Star Captain*. Best remember that 'cause she and her inner circle are quite particular 'bout it...heh, heh. Weird, right? But hey, I met guys with weirder titles and ranks...met a guy out in the Oberon Confederation once who called himself the High Exalted Grand Poobah of the Royal Water Buffaloes. Compared to him and a few others Star Captain is actually kind of normal, though Rosse is kind of crazy if you believe the stories."

"Stories?" Andreas noted with a hint of curiosity.

"Yeah, weird stuff...", the orange jumpsuit wearing man remarked, his voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper although the large

smile on his face betrayed his amusement. "Apparently she has... visions. At least that's what I heard."

"Visions?" Smith said inquiringly.

"Yeah, I heard from a bunch of guys who hooked up with the Raiders before me that she has these crazy visions and dreams," Anderson stated with a grin, though his voice had taken on a serious tone. "One of the best stories they told me was that the Raiders were all set to hit this world up on the Rasalhague District's Periphery border near the Lyrans. It was a sweet little mining world, barely any defenses and according to the rumor mill the miners had found a whole ass-load of gold."

Andreas unconsciously nodded at that. Gold was something that could be exchanged far more easily than House Bills could, rivaling only the C-Bill really in how much it could be worth. Out in the Periphery, the edge of human civilization, even the ubiquitous ComStar and its currency were far and few at times. That made precious metals and certain goods desired and appraised even more than the legal tender that seemed to make the Inner Sphere go round.

"Now 'bout an hour before the jump the word comes down that the attack is canceled and the Raiders are going to move instead to hit a Lyrans world just over the border instead. Well this don't sit well with most of the Raiders and people start talking 'bout a mutiny," Anderson continued. "Of course that didn't last long once the Star Captain heard. She had 'bout a dozen of the guys threatening mutiny spaced and that shut people up right quick."

"I fail to see how this is relevant...," Smith began to say only to be interrupted by Anderson.

"I'm getting there you impatient asshole, jeez," the imprisoned pirate griped. "Now where was I? Oh yeah...so after all this the Raiders hit the Lyrans world instead and they make off like bandits...yadda yadda yadda. Now then, a few months later it comes through the mill that the world the Raiders were supposed to hit, the one Rosse turned away from, got raided by one of the groups out of the Oberon Confederation seven days after the Raiders had turned away from it."

Now at first everyone was pissed on account that they were thinking that some other group had gotten the gold, but then they heard what had happened to they guys who went on the raid. Turns out that some Combine big-shot named Ricol had planted the rumor and had a whole shit-load of troops waiting to kill whoever decided to show up. The guys out of the Oberon Confederation got slaughtered according to the grapevine."

Andreas nodded his head in understanding. Planting rumors to lure in the enemy was an age-old trick and one the Burons had both used and fallen for in the past. It also didn't surprise him that the pirates who had fallen for the trick would be slaughtered. The Combine was hardly known for its acts of kindness and compassion.

"Now here's the weird part. After everyone heard 'bout that someone overheard one of Rosse's main guys talking," Thom Anderson continued to explain. "Apparently Rosse got a vision the night before in which she saw people being killed by a bunch of crimson arrows and some such shit. Well it turns out that this Ricol guy, I hear, is called both 'The Red Duke' and 'The Red Hunter' because his personal emblem is a figure of a guy with a bow and arrow all colored red."

The room was quiet for a moment before Smith spoke, "You mean to tell us Mr. Anderson that this...Star Captain Rosse called off her attack because she had this...vision? That she somehow foresaw the future?"

"Sounds crazy, don't it?" Anderson replied matter-of-factly. "I thought so too, but then I wound up in here."

"Wait, I'm lost," Andreas interjected, honestly confused on what the man had just said. "What does your being in prison have to do with...?"

"Heh, let me ask you something," the one armed pirate said calmly. "You Burons were operating out in this neck of space for quite awhile, hitting Combine worlds for the Feddies. So tell me something...you ever hear of the Black Lightning Raiders before you got to Antallos and got shanghaied by Vorax?"

Sitting there Andreas Staedele could honestly say that he hadn't heard of the pirate band before the name had been dropped in the intel report handed to him on Antallos after he had hired young J.J. Cody. However, that wasn't particularly alarming as the Periphery was home to more pirate bands than one could ever hope to count, or so it seemed. Not having heard of the Black Lightning Raiders before hadn't really bothered him and right now he was failing to see whatever Anderson was getting at.

"No," the merc leader responded calmly. "But then I didn't really have a chance to go sightseeing between the time the Burons arrived in system and the time that Vorax pressed us into service and sent us on our merry little way here."

"Fair enough," Anderson commented before continuing. "Well I'll tell you something that the asswipe sitting next to you found out in a previous session. The first time the Black Lightning set foot onto Antallos was four months before Vorax started recruiting. Hell, as far as I know the first time the Raiders have ever even come down to this neck of space was when we raided Kesai IV and that there was 'bout a year or so before we stepped foot onto Antallos. I was with the Raiders for five years, joined up with them on Star's End. During that time we raided the Lyrans, the Dracs...hell we even raided the Oberon Confederation, but not once did I ever hear from some of the more senior guys 'bout Rosse ever taking the Raiders on a plunder run outside of the area between Main Street in the Commonwealth and Tarnby in the Combine."

"Your point, Mr. Anderson?" Smith asked.

"The point is that we were more than happy raiding where we were when all of a sudden Rosse decides to move operations and announces that we're heading towards the Outworlds Alliance and Combine border," the ex-pirate turned incarcerated informational source responded sharply. "Now you boys might not know much 'bout being pirates, what with being such fine, upstanding citizens and all," Anderson continued, sarcasm dripping from his tone, "So let me enlighten you 'bout a few things. You don't go leaving prime hunting grounds for new ones unless you get forced off and it be too much trouble to try and fight to retake 'em. You certainly don't go making

your way to an area where you ain't got shit for info on what you can be expecting in terms of opposition and plunder."

"Why ruin a good thing, eh?" Andreas offered, actually understanding the concept pretty well as the decades of fighting against the Dracs had made the Cav experts in dealing with the Snakes in many ways and moving the Cav to fight against someone else, say the Capellans, without some serious intel gathering would definitely put him and his people out of their comfort zone.

"Right," the orange jumpsuit clad Anderson replied, "That's it exactly."

"So you're suggesting that she had another vision? That this vision of hers guided the Raiders to this end of the Periphery?" Smith asked, his tone still as stoic as ever.

"Don't know," Anderson responded as he shrugged his shoulders. "What I do know is that a month before Vorax starts recruiting we were on Antallos for a few weeks of relaxing and the selling of the swag we had acquired on our last few raids."

"Then why didn't the Black Lightning Raiders participate in Vorax's plan?" Staedele asked with a hint of confusion as he could not recall hearing any scuttlebutt about the Raiders amongst Vorax's group.

"Because Rosse packed everything up and left Antallos with the Raiders just after Vorax started recruiting," Anderson answered. "Some of the guys were saying she had another vision...that she saw Dropships destroyed in a blinding flash and then something 'bout a metal eagle flying in from out of nowhere."

Staedele felt his mouth go dry as his brain clicked what was being said into place. Dropships had been destroyed in a blinding flash. Many of the the pirate Dropships that had attacked Earth had been hit by nukes and a good number of them had indeed been destroyed by the powerful weapons in brilliantly blinding flashes of light and energy. Then there was the thing about the metal eagle. The emblem used by the GDI was a bronze eagle and the GDI had seemingly come out of nowhere when they had attacked Antallos and Port Krin in retaliation for the attack on Earth. Sitting there the leader of the

Burons wondered if it was all coincidental or that maybe Anderson, as Smith had warned earlier, was perhaps spinning a story in order to stay alive. This was all starting to sound too weird and all but impossible, but then so to was the idea that a 21st Century version of Terra from an alternate reality could suddenly wind up in his own universe.

"That is an interesting tale Mr. Anderson," Smith stated stoically. "But if you had heard about this vision and your commander was pulling your group out, how was it that *you* came to be part of the force that Vorax recruited. One would think that you would have heeded your commander."

"Yeah well, I got greedy I suppose," the imprisoned pirate sounded a bit sheepish. "Besides, the only people who put any weight into the stories were the guys who had been with the Raiders the longest. Me and a bunch of other guys, we thought it was nothing but shit. You know, stuff you tell noobies to see them shake in their boots, stuff that people don't refute because they want you to think that they're a badass so you won't try to mess with them. How was I suppose to know it was true?!"

Staedele sat there a moment before finally speaking, "This is all really interesting, but it doesn't tell me where Lt. Cody is or what was done with him?"

"Well if he's still alive then he'd be with the other prisoners on the Star Captain's ship," Anderson replied slowly. "She keeps them all over there on her Dropper, the *Blazing Cat*."

"She keeps all of the prisoners on her own private Dropship?" Andreas asked speaking before Smith had a chance to voice his own question. "She didn't offload any on Antallos or some other world? You know, make a bit extra selling them as slaves?"

"Ha!" Anderson laughed loudly. "You don't know the Star Captain. She don't sell slaves. As I said before, there's a pot going 'bout what she does with them. No one bets on them being sold as slaves though. See, a couple of guys back when we were up by the Oberon Confederation tried to sell a few prisoners off as slaves once. Rosse

had them executed in front of everyone for it. It wasn't pretty."

"Well if she doesn't sell them off then what does she do with them?" Andreas inquired calmly. "She can't keep them all on one Dropship, not for long at least."

Grinning slightly Anderson leaned forward over the table in a conspiratorial manner before saying, "Well, the rumor is that she takes 'em all back to Ayatori."

The statement caused both Smith and Staedele to pause for a moment. It was Smith who broke the silence.

"Ayatori? Is this a place or a person?" the agent inquired, the pen in his hand hovering over the notes he had been writing in the file before him.

"According to scuttlebutt it's the Star Captain's base of operations," Anderson answered.

The White House
Washington D.C, United States of America
Earth, Grantville Cluster, Periphery
April 10, 2007/3022

"So where exactly is this place, this...Ayatori, was it?" President Jack Ryan asked as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, having decided to forego sitting at his desk in order to take advantage of one of the more comfortable chairs in the Oval Office.

"Well that is a bit of a complicated matter Mr. President," Ed Foley, Director of Central Intelligence replied hesitantly as he leaned forward from where he sat next to his wife on one of the two sofas in the room.

"Un-complicate it for me, Ed." Jack Ryan stated, his tone showing just a hint of weariness even as he heard the small 'clink' of ice being dropped into a scotch glass from across the room.

"Frankly speaking, we don't know Mr. President," Mary Patricia Foley, the Director of Operations for the CIA calmly answered, coming to the aid of her husband.

Sitting back in the chair Ryan spoke slowly, "How exactly is it we don't know the location?"

"There is no reference to any planet by the name of Ayatori in the Battletech source materials, sir," Mary Pat answered promptly.

"Didn't the prisoner...", Ryan began to say only to stop as the man's name escaped him at that moment.

"Anderson, sir," Ed supplied.

"Right, didn't this Anderson provide us with a location?" Jack inquired as he sought to fight down the headache that he was already beginning to feel.

"That is where it gets a bit complicated sir," Mary Pat supplied slowly. "If you will note in the transcript taken from the meeting Anderson states that all he knows about the place is that it is Rosse's home base and that he thinks it is located out on the edge of the Periphery somewhere. Other than that he doesn't know a whole lot about it."

"How can he not know about the place the group he belongs to calls home?" Jack asked pointedly. "I know people in the BT univer-...this universe aren't supposed to be the best educated, especially those out in the Periphery and on the fringes of society, but still, you'd think that-...."

"Mr. President, disregarding the complexity of astronavigation and the state of education in many parts of the universe, there actually is a very good reason as to why Mr. Anderson does not really know anything about Ayatori," Mary Pat politely interrupted. "That reason is that he hasn't actually ever been to Ayatori, ever."

Sitting there in puzzlement for a moment Jack Ryan, President of the

United States of America, finally remarked, "Wait, what? How is that possible? He's part of this pirate group, isn't he?"

"He is sir. We've confirmed that much from what our intelligence people on Antallos managed to dig up and from a few of the other prisoners taken during the Invasion. Apparently, Mr. Anderson has never set foot on or been in orbit of Ayatori...or at least he swears that he hasn't," Ed spoke up quickly. "And we're fairly certain that he's telling us the truth about that."

"Again," Ryan said, "How exactly is that possible?"

"I would think that would be rather obvious."

Turning his head slightly to look to the back of the man who had spoken and was fixing a few drinks at the small wet bar kept in the office Ryan noted in slightly sarcastic tone, "Do you have something to share with the rest of the class or would you prefer to remain your usual cryptic self John?"

"Cryptic? Me? Hardly," John Clark remarked with a wry grin as he turned away with the tray of drinks. "Come on Jack don't tell me you've forgotten all the things you learned during your time at the Agency?"

"I was just an analyst if you recall," Jack Ryan grinned back as he accepted the scotch on the rocks his friend offered him.

"An analyst who became a Deputy Director, not to mention someone who always seemed to be getting into the thick of it if I recall," Clark commented slowly as he handed Ed and Mary Pat their drinks. "Or have you forgotten about that submarine you tricked the Russians out of or that time in Columbia or when you and I had to go and-...?"

"Alright, alright...you've made your point," Ryan interrupted, not needing to go through the entire list of his past exploits. "Still, I fail to see how it is all 'rather obvious' as you put it."

Taking a seat in the chair just across from the President, Clark replied, "Obviously it is part of this Star Captain Rosse's attempts to

maintain operational security. I'd wager that a very good portion of her group have never been to this base of hers."

Nodding her head as she set down her glass of scotch, Mary Pat confirmed her former teacher's analysis, "According to Anderson this seems to be the case exactly. Apparently the only people who go to Ayatori are those who are part of Rosse's inner circle and those who are permanently stationed on Rosse's Dropship, the *Blazing Cat*, and her Jumpship, the *Cheshire*. The majority of the Black Lightning Raiders are hirelings, like Anderson is; men and women that got picked up from one world or another and work under the direction of Rosse and her lieutenants. These hirelings make up the majority of the forces that compose the Black Lightning Raiders."

"Oh that's good, she's good," Clark interjected.

"Care to expound upon that John?" Ryan inquired.

Giving a small grin as he finished a sip of his scotch Clark asked, "You remember all the stuff that happened back when Rainbow was founded, right? How Popov basically started waking up various terrorist groups we hadn't heard from in a long time in order to cover up what Brightling and his little band of radical tree-huggers were up to."

Jack nodded as he took a sip of his drink. He had seen and been at or near the center of quite a number of such nefarious schemes. Heck, he wouldn't even be the President if it hadn't been for one. However, despite having lived through about three or four dozen of such things --seriously, you stop counting after the first dozen or so-- the one where someone comes that close to actually releasing a bio-engineered plague that would've killed nearly every man, woman, and child on earth.... Well that one kind of sticks with you.

"Similar concept to that really," Clark stated simply. "Basically it's a rendition of the Cell Operating System that most secretive groups use. When Rosse decides to go a-roving she fills out her need for extra muscle and manpower with folks that she can afford to lose if things ever go straight to hell. If she has to run then Rosse can cut bait and head to her little hidey hole while those she hired take the heat. She

can sit nice and pretty, hidden away while whoever wants her goes chasing after shadows and dead ends because even if a bunch of Raiders get caught Rosse will still be safe as only she and the core group of the Raiders know where their base really is."

"It gets worse," Mary Pat stated firmly.

Letting out a sigh as he felt his headache start to strengthen Jack nodded for her to continue before taking another sip of his drink.

"As you are aware Mr. President," the female director continued, "All of the agents and most of the personnel assigned to interact and deal with the prisoners and people we have had to deal with since the Invasion have all been briefed on keeping aware of any signs or words that might indicate that someone is not exactly who they say they are. We've been doing this predominantly to avoid infiltration by the various clandestine agencies operating in the Inner Sphere and Periphery and thus avoid any major security leaks. Special Agent Smith immediately caught that Rosse refers to herself as being a *Star Captain* and Anderson's insistence on it, flagging the session for our immediate attention using the highest priority level."

"As you are also aware, sir, the term Star Captain is used as a rank amongst the Clans," Ed Foley said, picking up from where his wife had left off. "However, that isn't the only thing that we immediately noted. Anya Rosse's last name of Rosse is listed prominently amongst the known Bloodnames of the Clans, belonging specifically to the Nova Cats. In fact their second Khan was a woman by the name of Sandra Rosse, who was also the daughter of their first Khan, Philip Drummond. Not only was she a Khan, but Sandra Rosse is also the person who introduced many of the mystical beliefs and ways that are associated with the Nova Cats...or at least that's what the Battletech source material says."

Setting his glass down on the small end table next to his chair Jack Ryan slowly asked, "We've gotten a number of reports from Antallos of people running around with names and titles seemingly pulled straight out of fictional works. How certain are we that this particular case isn't all just a strange set of coincidences?"

Taking a deep breath and then letting it out slowly Mary Pat Foley answered, "This initial session of questioning, the one Major Staedele was present for, didn't continue for much longer after Anderson revealed that he had no clue as to where Ayatori is. Anderson simply couldn't tell us much about Ayatori, though he did give us a good deal on the Black Lightning Raiders composition. Because of Rosse's hiring practices the Raiders don't really have a fixed number of members, but from what we gathered from Anderson we can easily estimate them as being about as strong as a reinforced BT battalion."

"Major Staedele is of course a bit peeved about not being able to learn where the Raiders may be, and rightly so, but he seems to understand that it is the nature of the business and we've agreed to inform him of any further leads that may come up," Ed interjected as he pulled several more files out of his briefcase.

"Is he aware of a potential Clan connection?" Ryan asked.

"To the best of our knowledge, no, he isn't aware of it," Ed continued. "We were waiting to see if you wanted him to be informed of it, sir."

Jack Ryan sat for a moment in contemplation before answering, "Major Staedele has enough on his plate at the moment I think. Besides, you have yet to convince me that this *supposed* connection to the Clans is more than just happenstance."

Nodding in understanding Ed Foley continued with the briefing, "After the good Major left the base and we had reviewed the tapes and transcripts of the initial session we had Special Agent Smith, accompanied by Agents Brown and Jones, question Anderson further. What we learned is...well it doesn't seem to bode well."

"We learned quite a bit through that session as well as the others carried out over the past few days," Mary Pat picked up for her husband as he began to lay the contents of the files in his hands out on the coffee table that separated the two of them from the President. "Anderson was questioned repeatedly regarding what he knew of the makeup of Rosse's Inner Circle...their names, its military strength, what equipment they use, etc. According to him she has four main lieutenants: a man named Rodrigo, a man named Hector, a woman

named Eva Khatib, and a man named Adar Djerassi. All four are often heard being referred to as Star Commander which is another Clan rank. While Anderson insists that Rodrigo and Hector don't have a last name the last names used by the other two, like Rosse, also match up with known Clan Bloodnames. Khatib is a name from Clan Cloud Cobra while Djerassi is listed as being a Bloodname found within Clan Goliath Scorpion. To top it all off, Rosse's core group is seems to be an irregular sized Mech company of fifteen Mechs organized into three smaller units of five Mechs each. She also has some Aerospace Fighters as well as infantry support, though Anderson wasn't sure on the exact numbers for either of them."

"During one of these sessions we also showed Anderson pictures, artistic renderings, and game figures of various Mechs," Ed continued from his wife as both the President and Clark began to look at the various photos and pictures taken from Battletech source material that he was laying out. "The good news is that he didn't identify any Clan Mechs amongst the equipment that Rosse is using."

"I hear a 'but' in there," Clark interjected.

"Yeah," Ed said with a nod, "While Anderson didn't identify any Clan OmniMechs or even any of their second-line Mechs, he did identify several designs that are incredibly rare in the Inner Sphere."

"How rare?" Ryan asked.

"So rare that few are known to exist outside of the stockpiles that ComStar is supposed to be keeping," Ed replied, his voice having taken on a deathly serious tone. "To make sure Anderson wasn't just picking them at random we didn't provide him with the names of the Mechs or their weapon loadouts, but had him try and give us their names and weapon loads wherever possible. We also included at random a bunch of Mechs created by Battletech fans and from various other fictional universes that showcase Mechs and giant robots."

"Well?" Clark asked, having taught a similar information gathering technique to both Ed and Mary Pat back when they had just been starting out at the Agency, though he had used photos of Soviet

aircraft at the time.

"He found some of the fan designed Battlemechs to be rather interesting and most of the large robots to be rather funny looking, but that was it. He concentrated only on designs that we got directly from the source materials," Ed Foley answered promptly. "Of the Mechs he indicated as belonging to Rosse's inner circle he got most of their names right, though he did have trouble on some of the weapon systems for each Mech but it was within what one would expect for margin of error seeing as he isn't fully aware of the lostech names for some of the weapons."

Nodding in understanding Ryan said, "Alright, what are we looking at then?"

"Rosse apparently pilots a *Spartan*," Mary Pat stated as she indicated the rendering of the 80ton Assault Mech before pushing forward several other pictures. "Along with that Anderson noted a *Shootist*, a *Hussar*, an *Exterminator*, a *Shogun*, a *Crockett*, a *Crab*, a *Firefly*, and an *Excalibur* along with some more common designs. However, the ones I just named raise concerns as most of them, at least according to the source materials, aren't prevalent outside of ComStar's hidden stockpiles. The exception to that are the *Firefly* and *Shogun*, but that is a bit more concerning as source material says that those designs weren't seen back in the Inner Sphere until Wolf's Dragoons showed up in 3005."

Leaning forward slightly to scrutinize the files laid out before him Jack Ryan he set his elbows on the arm rests of his chair and folded his hands in front of his face, "You're basing this all on the Battletech source material which, I might remind you, has already proven to be in error over certain details."

"We took that into account and after Anderson identified these particular designs we had them sent to Major Staedele and his mechwarrriors to see if they could identify them without being given any major details on them," Ed responded in defense of the intel that had been gathered. "Out of all of the designs they were only able to identify the *Crockett* as it is still apparently found in limited numbers as a training Mech. We can try and see if Lt. Col. Hale and Colonel

Azim recognize any of them, but I suspect we'll see similar results."

"Hmm," Jack hummed in acknowledgment as he sat contemplating what he had just heard. "Is it possible that this is ComStar's or one of the Successor States' doing?"

"I wouldn't rule ComStar out completely until we get more intel, but from what we know of their history they have pulled off similar covert operations in the past. However, such operations were always aimed at suppressing technological advances and rediscoveries as well as keeping the Successor States in conflict with one another," Ed responded as he reminded those present of what had been written in a very lengthy report analyzing the shadow wars and shadow games that ComStar liked to play. "Nothing we've learned so far seems to really indicate such a motive with Rosse and the Raiders. Also, if this was a ComStar operation or even an operation being pulled off by one of the Successor States, then why use so many rare Mechs when far more common designs would fit better with the equipment expected of pirates? ComStar would know this. They don't risk pieces of lostech unless they are absolutely forced to do so. Similarly, the Successor States wouldn't want to risk losing such rare Mechs and the technology on them, especially considering that nearly all of those Mechs haven't been seen since the First and Second Succession Wars. No, the only people who would use such rare Mechs would be those who aren't aware of just how rare they are."

"If you recall, sir," Mary Pat spoke back up, "Wolf's Dragoons are noted to have made a similar mistake when they arrived in the Inner Sphere back in 3005. Being from the Clans they simply brought back designs that they knew were from the era of the Star League rather than any of the more advanced designs that the Clans had created on their own. They never thought that a number of those Star League Era designs pretty much went extinct due to the Succession Wars."

"That's true, the Dragoons did make that initial blunder," Ryan stated calmly. "However, most people just chalked it up to them having come upon a large cache of lostech. What's to say that this isn't actually the case here?"

"Mr. President, separately all of this might seem like circumstantial

evidence and most of our Inner Sphere contemporaries would probably attribute it to the eccentricities of a pirate who happened to come upon a cache of lostech somewhere. However, they don't know about the Clans like we do," Ed Foley summed up putting all of the authority that his position as the Director of the CIA gave him into his voice. "Mr. President, from what we've been able to determine we've got a woman who uses a rank found primarily in the Clans and uses such ranks for her most trusted lieutenants. She and two of these subordinates have last names that match up with known Clan Bloodnames. Her core unit is an irregular company of fifteen Mechs which are organized into groups of five while several of these Mechs are so rare that they are only found within the forces of ComStar and Wolf's Dragoons. On top of that she is reported to have visions on a number of occasions which have supposedly safeguarded her and her unit. There are just too many specific details here for this all to just be coincidental, sir."

"Hmm," Jack hummed again as he digested all of the facts presented to him.

"You know what they say Jack.... Once is happenstance, twice you can chalk up to coincidence, but three times? That's enemy action," Clark interjected, paraphrasing a line from a movie that had turned into words to live by during his time in Vietnam and later on throughout his service in the CIA and then Rainbow.

Nodding his head in agreement Ryan concluded seriously, "If she isn't a Clanner then there are few other explanations that would fit. Either way she's problem that deserves looking into. However, one thing still bothers me about all of this."

"Sir?" Mary Pat questioned slowly.

"Why?" Jack asked calmly. "Why are she and her group out here instead of back in Clan Space?"

Quiet descended upon the room for a moment before being broken by Ed Foley speaking up, "We aren't completely sure about that sir. We've got people on it trying to figure out what her motivation might be, but frankly speaking our intelligence is rather limited. Anderson

gave us far more than we could hope for, but we need more if we're to try and speculate on why a person from the Clans is poking around and masquerading as a pirate. She could be a rogue or an exile or she could be on some sort of reconnaissance mission or something. Until we get more intel we won't know for sure."

Nodding his head Jack Ryan understood the dilemma somewhat from his own time working at 'The Company' and his short tenure as National Security Advisor. Technical and structural information could be codified and quantified for analysis just from an informant slipping you some pictures and schematics. Figuring out exactly what a person's motivation was at times and which way they were going to go when it came time to make a decision was much harder and required far more knowledge on the person in question. Usually that knowledge came from actually meeting the person or at the very least meeting and interviewing people who actually are intimately familiar with the person of interest. It was just such knowledge that had allowed him to see the truth behind Captain Marko Ramius's actions when everyone else had been concentrating upon the technical information regarding the *Red October* and her captain.

"What are your recommendations then?" Ryan asked, already suspecting but just wanting to confirm his own suspicions.

"Honestly sir," Mary Pat Foley began, "There isn't a whole lot we can do at the moment. The Inner Sphere and the Periphery are huge places and right now we have little idea as to where we should be looking. "We can try and narrow things down, but we need more information to really do so. Unfortunately we don't have the information gathering networks we need for this kind of thing. We could try and see if we can get information from the Draconis Combine, but I don't like the idea of doing so. They're trying to be far too 'chummy' towards us as is already."

Once again the President nodded in understanding. Truth-be-told he too felt uneasy with the relationship that Earth was beginning to cultivate with the Draconis Combine. House Kurita wasn't well known for its acts of charity. What they were known for were their acts of brutality, intrigue, and subterfuge. He also recalled from his days of actually paying attention to Battletech when it had been

thought to just be fiction that the Kuritans often employed a scheme of trying and sucker mercenary units through a 'company store' policy of basically forcing the mercs into the Combine's debt and then seizing all of the mercenaries assets as recompense. Asking the Combine for assistance on this, or anyone who wasn't loyal first and foremost to Earth for that matter, would be foolhardy.

"Agreed," Jack noted strongly as he weighed options. "If we ask the Combine for help on this then not only would we run the risk of becoming reliant upon them for intel, but we also open ourselves up to potential security breaches. They'd almost assuredly want to know why we want such info and I don't particularly want the Combine getting anymore curious about our affairs than they already are. I especially don't want them sniffing around us in relation anything that might have to do with the Clans...at least not yet."

"If we wanted to minimize security breaches then we should have never agreed to actually let those 'diplomats' of theirs even into the solar system, let alone onto the planet itself," Ed noted rather caustically as he and every other major head of intelligence on CEarth were all distrusting of the Combine and their intentions. "Pardon me Mr. President, I don't mean to imply that you were in any way-...."

"It's okay Ed. Those of us who were more than hesitant about it got overruled, plain and simple," Ryan remarked calmly.

Honestly Jack Ryan could say that the session held regarding the Combine diplomatic party and allowing them onto Earth had been one of the most pointed debates so far held under the auspices of the CSN. He along with a number of other leaders had been rather insistent that allowing the Combine officials anywhere near Earth would be a bad idea, at least until the planet had been secured against any other invasion attempts. Especially considering the amount of force a Great House like the Draconis Combine could throw at an individual planet made the attack by Vorax's pirates look like the proverbial drop in the proverbial bucket. However, he and the others had been overruled on the matter and all that was left now was to try and deal with the consequences as best they could. And of course there was the not too subtle message he had gotten from the

Church regarding disclosure. Already he had learned that the Vatican was indeed making good on its promise of approaching other heads of state. Honestly, did these people not realize just how big of a target they were painting on Earth and all of its inhabitants and just how vulnerable they all really were? Did they suddenly forget that Earth had its own host of problems in many of its poorer and less developed areas?

"Getting back to the matter at hand," Mary Pat stated somberly. "One thing we can do is follow news reports."

"Excuse me?" Ryan said, a bit confused by what his Director of Operations had just said.

"While I loathe saying this, we could use ComStar to try and gather some basic intel," Mary Pat began to explain, hurrying herself slightly as she saw the protests beginning to form on the face of her President. "I don't mean we ask them for intel, Mr. President. I'm already quite convinced that ComStar is possibly the most dangerous group within the Inner Sphere. However, ComStar also puts out news reports every week or so. These news reports are partially their own propaganda and partially compilations of news stories from around the Inner Sphere and parts of the Periphery that are being reported by various journalists. If you recall, that Davion reporter on Antallos had her report on the GDI's battle for Port Krin transmitted throughout the Sphere because of one of these news reports. Pirate raids are often noted in such reports as well."

"You're suggesting that we watch for reports on raids by Rosse's band of pirates and then use such reports to try and figure out more about her and where she could potentially be," Clark noted with a hint of pride regarding his former student. "That's pretty good, both us and the Soviets used to do similar things back during the Cold War to try and figure out what the other was up to."

Nodding her head to that Mary pat continued, "It won't be much, especially since pirate raids on remote worlds aren't reported in a very timely manner...or at all in some cases. However, it would allow us to start creating a timeline regarding Rosse's movements. If we create a similar timeline using what Anderson knows we can

reference both for patterns and hopefully get a better idea as to where Rosse likes to hide and where she might decide to pop up in the future. I'd also like to suggest having Brox transferred from the GDI Foreign Legion back to Earth so we can get his take on Rosse."

Ryan nodded in understanding, especially since Brox was a former Clansmen, though he still asked, "It will take some time to get him back here. Wouldn't it be easier to simply have someone show Brox what we've got already?"

"Normally, yes it would," Mary Pat stated as her husband gathered up the pictures that had been laid out on the coffee table. "However, we've been getting reports of ever increasing activity on Antallos by people we suspect are agents for various organizations in the Inner Sphere. While the agents we have watching the Legion and the psych profile we've drawn up on him all suggest that Brox wouldn't intentionally betray Earth, I'd rather not take the risk of a leak, especially considering that this seems to deal with the Clans. It could also be more beneficial for us if Brox was actually present when we question Anderson further. He might pick up on things that we wouldn't immediately catch or even think of asking."

"Alright, I'll see what I can make happen," Ryan responded knowing he couldn't simply give the order like he could with the Armed Forces of the United States. "We'll need to inform the heads of the foreign intel agencies we've been working with as well. We've made a great deal of progress in our relations with the Russians and Chinese. I don't want either of them to be able to turn around and say that we've been withholding information from them."

"Of course, sir," Mary Pat stated. "In fact that brings us to the matter we discussed with you of a few days ago."

"Ah, yes," Jack said, recalling the meeting he had been in with Mary Pat and Ed as well as the rest of his National Security Council. "Have you finished talking it over with everyone else?"

"Yes sir," Ed replied as he put a new file onto the coffee table. "We've gotten agreements from pretty much all of the major foreign intelligence agencies heads. They've discussed it with their heads of

state and most of them seem to be in agreement with you on the matter."

"Excuse me," John Clark spoke up, "But I feel like the odd man out here. What exactly are you talking about?"

Turning his focus onto his long time friend Ryan began, "About a week ago Mary Pat and Ed approached me regarding a certain problem that they and many of the directors from our allies are experiencing."

Accepting a nod from the President, Mary Pat began to explain further, "As we mentioned earlier in our briefing regarding Rosse we've been having some serious issues with trying to gather intel. The problem is that we don't have networks established to gather what we need as other than Antallos the bulk of our intel assets are here on Earth. Sure we've sent out missions into the Inner Sphere and Periphery to try and gather some intelligence, but those three missions just aren't enough."

"We've been approaching this whole situation pretty disjointedly and we can't afford that," Ed said, picking up the explanation from his wife. "Most of the other agency heads agree that we need to really concentrate our efforts in order to get the information we need as well as to start carrying out larger operations. Unfortunately that is proving to be rather difficult given just how many intelligence agencies and organizations are trying to coordinate and work together for this."

"Bottom line is that we need to make some major changes and soon," Ryan interjected, deciding to get to the point. "To this end there has been a proposal made for a new organization that would oversee intelligence operations for the CSN by coordinating all of the various agencies efforts, deploying assets appropriately, and overseeing ops taking place off of Earth. It would be separate from the GDI but would still coordinate with them when it comes to operations and...."

"Wait, wait one minute there Jack," Clark interrupted strongly. "I know where you're going with this and the answer is no. You

understand me? No!"

"You could at least wait for me to ask you," Ryan replied with a rather wry grin as it wasn't often he could get such a reaction from his friend.

"Oh I know what you're going to ask me," Clark stated firmly as he got up from his chair and began to pace back and forth like a tiger caught in a cage. "Christ! I'm almost 63 years old, you know that? I should be contemplating retirement and playing with my grandkids, not gearing up for a whole new set of wars and conflicts. Hell, I've been grooming Ding to take over Rainbow ever since we finished up those matters in Siberia back when the Russians and Chinese were at each others' throats. For the last two years he's been basically running the daily operations for me."

"I know that and Ding has done a great job handling things, especially with expanding the number of teams out from two to six," Ryan countered slowly as he watched his friend stop pacing to look at him. "However, you're the only person who can do this John. The Russians, the Chinese, the Europeans...all of the major intel groups... they all respect you. You've got the years and experience in all of the various aspects of intel work and your creation and leadership of Rainbow has given you a unique understanding of how to recruit from and coordinate with the various agencies and militaries. You're also the only one that everyone can agree upon and trust when it comes to this. I'm asking you, as your friend and as your President, to take up the position of Director for this new organization."

Slumping back down in his chair, the wood of it creaking in protest to the sudden application of force, John Clark, a man once known as John Kelly, let out a sigh.

"You just had to go and do it, didn't you? You just had to pull out both the friend card and the President card, didn't you?" the long time intel operative and current Rainbow Six stated, the tone of his voice holding a small tinge of playful friendliness to it despite its more overt seriousness. "I guess Domingo is going to be getting the official title of Rainbow Six now."

"Good, then we can let the other members of the leadership know and get to-...", Ryan began before being interrupted.

"However, there are a few conditions," Clark interjected as he looked his friend and President in the eye. "If I'm going to do this then we're going to make certain that it gets done right."

Dropship *Blazing Cat*
Nadir Jump Point, Unnamed Planet
Periphery
April 11, 2007/3022

Space.... Open.... Empty and black except for the twinkling of stars....

Alone....

No, not alone....

Behind her...the totems of the Clans....

Before her...the emblems of the Scavenger Lords....

There! The Bronze Eagle...turning, looking...focusing upon her, no, looking through her, past her....

A figure...coming forth from the Eagle...a knight...armor blue in color and fiendish in style.

The devil knight...was before her, a terrible sight...the sword in its hand rising, falling....

"No!!!!!"

Waking with a startled cry, Star Captain Anya Rosse found herself gulping down lung-full after precious lung-full of the recycled air that filled her cabin. Her heart felt as though it was going to burst from her chest it was beating so hard and so fast. Blinking her green eyes to try and rid them of the sticky feeling in them that comes from

sleep, the olive skinned woman noted the tepid feeling of sweat on her body and in the material of her bedding. Hands shaky, Anya fumbled with the buckles and restraints that kept her bound to her bed-rack whilst in the zero-g environment. Finally releasing herself to float slightly away from her mattress, the leader of the Black Lightning Raiders pushed away her sweat soaked bedding. Floating there, using one of the calming exercises taught to her when she had still been in the sibko, Anya slowly steadied her breathing and felt the pounding of her heart ease.

"So real...too real," the woman thought with a frown, the wrinkles and worry lines in her face tightening as well. *"Another sign sent to keep me upon the true path."*

Pushing off a wall and floating into the fresher, Anya turned on the lights there to stare into the mirror above the zero-g sink. Staring back at her with the same green eyes was the visage of a woman who would have once been called beautiful when she was younger, at least by freebirth standards. That beauty had begun to fade, due to both the rigors of combat and the burdens she carried, but in its place left it left a hard won strength and determination that was almost equally attractive. Her left hand grasping the sink, Anya brushed her right hand back through raven hair that was already streaked with strands of white and grey. In a few months she would be 46 years of age. She was at an age that, even with a Bloodname, would see her beginning the downward spiral of her life as a warrior amongst the Clans. Amongst Clan Nova Cat, however, she would still be a valued warrior for much longer, given that her skills had yet to truly dull and she was one of the few warriors to be gifted with multiple visions and dreams.

"Though such a path would have required me to have not been branded a criminal and sentenced to death," Anya shamelessly reflected as she tucked her left foot under a restraint bar so she would remain somewhat stationary.

Pressing her right foot to the pedal that controlled water flow on the sink the 45 year old woman guided the small blobs of water into her waiting hands. Delicately, so as to not send the water floating out of control around the fresher and accidentally out into her cabin, Anya

raised her hands to her face as her green eyes closed. The cool caress of the water blobs on her skin, warm and sticky with sweat, was a welcome relief and helped to calm and ease the feelings and sensations that came as part of a vision. Opening her eyes ever so slightly Anya reached over to the vacuum hose next to the sink. Flicking the switch to 'on' she noted the feeling of suction from the mouth of the pump and finding it adequate she began to run it over the skin of her face so as to reclaim the bits water she had left clinging there. Waste was intolerable and water was a precious commodity during travel through space, especially when such travel was through the Periphery using systems that few people, other than her and her crew, had proper charts for.

Finishing with the vacuum hose and putting it back into its cradle, Anya debated for a moment whether or not she should utilize the zero-g shower that was part of the private refresher unit. Making her decision she began to strip off the tight black synthetic material that made up the two pieces of clothing she had worn to sleep in, Rosse stood as nude as the day she had been birthed from the iron womb by the scientists of her clan. Scars from old wounds and trials past dotted her olive skin here and there and though she would soon be 46 years of age she still maintained her body to the same rigorous standards that had been worked into her back when she had been still part of the sibko. Though she was old she was still a warrior and as such she still held herself to the same standards that had gained her the Bloodname Rosse, a name she still held to....

"Even if I have been abjured," Anya muttered heatedly as she touched the scar that crossed the tight muscles of her lower abs and denoted that she had survived the attempts of those who wished her death after she had refused to accept her banishment and the stripping of her Bloodname and status as both a warrior and a member of Clan Nova Cat. "They shall not take what I earned through rightful victory."

Speaking so caused memories of her shame to push into her mind, memories of what she had found falling upon ears that refused to hear and of the crimes she had been charged with. Her crimes...false charges from those who would not see, who could not see the truth for what it was, who in turn thought her not only mad but also a

traitor to the Ways of Kerensky and marked her as chalcas – someone who was not only outside acceptable Clan culture, but one who openly challenged it.

"Savashri fools," Rosse cursed openly as she pounded her right hand into the metal wall next to the mirror above the zero-g sink. "If we do not recognize the truth of our past then we will not survive to see the future."

Having earned her Bloodname at the age of 24, Anya had counted herself as a ristar amidst the warriors of Clan Nova Cat. However, that had all changed when she had once again undertaken the Rite of Vision soon after earning her Bloodname. Unlike her previous two attempts and failures, one just after she had completed her Trial of Position to become not only a warrior of the Clan but also a Star Commander and another just before the Trial of Bloodright for the Rosse name had been declared and her sponsor had put her name forward, this third attempt had yielded a vision. It was because of that vision that her world and her life had begun to turn away from the path of her fellow Nova Cats and the rest of the Clans.

She had seen and what she had seen had led her to make a discovery both fascinating and terrifying in its implications, a discovery that called into question the Way of the Clans. Her discovery, when presented to the Oathmaster had been deemed blasphemous against the Sandra Rosse and Philip Drummond as well as against the Great Father and Nicholas Kerensky himself. It had marked her when she had tried to circumvent the Oathmaster and go directly to the Clan Council with her findings. She had thought that she had gathered enough evidence, as disturbing as it was, to properly present and argue before the Council so that the Council would act properly upon learning the truth. The fact that the Council had held a secret session to declare her chalcas and put her under a sentence of death proved just how wrong she had been and just how deaf her peers were to the truth she conveyed.

Shaking her head to clear away thoughts of the past Anya found not clarity, but the return of the images she had seen moments before in her dream. Gritting her teeth as she felt the frustration of such ambiguous visions weigh down upon her with the weight of an

Assault Mech, Anya reached over to the secondary com unit set into the wall of the fresher unit. While a shower to remove the rest of the sweat from her body would be nice, it was not necessary for she was a trueborn warrior of Clan Nova Cat and one of the Bloodnamed descendants of Sandra Rosse and through her, Phillip Drummond as well. Reaching over to the voice only com panel set into the wall of her fresher room Anya knew well that it would not do to put off analyzing the portents shown in her vision.

Flicking the com unit to a preset channel Rosse received a small tone before the tinny voice of a male technician came through the speaker, "Bridge Communications here, Star Captain."

Taking another calming breath Anya finally spoke, "Contact the *Pallas's Spear*. I have need to speak with Star Commander Khatib."

"Star Commander Khatib is present here, Star Captain" the answer came promptly from the communications tech, "She came over from the *Pallas's Spear* an hour ago."

Ignoring the dull ache behind her eyes Anya turned her gaze to the chronometer that was on the wall. Seeing that it read 0130 hours as set to the standard Terran 24-hour day, Anya quickly realized that it was a mere two and a half hours until the briefing she had scheduled with her officers was to take place and only four hours until they were scheduled to jump and begin execution of their next raid. Star Commander Eva Khatib was very early for it, but it was not surprising that Eva would come over early so as to conduct an impromptu inspection of the *Blazing Cat's* bridge. Star Commander Eva Khatib was not only the commander of Anya's aerospace fighters but she was also a meticulous perfectionist and taskmaster...more so than even the most stringent sibko instructor. Being the one trusted to carryout operational inspections of the flight crews for the Fortress Class *Blazing Cat* and Leopard CV Class *Pallas's Spear*, as well as the two freeborn pirate Dropships currently attached to the Tramp Class *Cheshire*, Eva had a flare for conducting inspections when the crews might be the least prepared. Like always, such meticulousness and dedication had proven beneficial for Anya.

"Put her on a private line and patch it to this station," Rosse ordered.

Waiting a moment for her subordinate to come online, Anya began to focus on the dream she had awoken from only moments earlier. Of all the visions she had seen this was the third to have featured the Bronze Eagle, a symbol she was only beginning to understand the true meaning of. However, it was the first to feature a knight, let alone a blue one wearing armor akin to a devil.

"Khatib here Star Captain," the Star Commander Eva Khatib's voice filtered through, breaking Anya out of her ruminations. "You require something of me before I continue with my inspection, quiaff?"

The sights and sounds of the experience still fresh in her mind, Anya paused before answering. "Aff, Eva...I...I have had another vision."

A pregnant pause was all that Anya received in return over the com unit, though it did not surprise her. Star Commander Eva Khatib had been a highly experienced and confident aerospace pilot of Clan Cloud Cobra. Having been a member of the Rossei Cloister, the ecumenical-political group within the Cobras that was dedicated to the same spiritualism practiced by Anya's own Clan, Eva was familiar with visions. Indeed, the Star Commander had received her own vision, which was one of the reasons why she was on this seemingly mad venture instead of flying through the skies of Homer or Babylon. Eva was the closest thing available to an Oathmaster since Anya had been forced to flee her fellow Nova Cats. As such, the Star Commander had been privy to all of the visions and dreams Anya had experienced. Hearing that another one had come was always a matter of utmost importance.

"I shall be at your quarters shortly," Khatib stated bluntly over the com. "I will rouse Star Commander Djerassi from his quarters and-...."

Hearing the chime for the door to her quarters Anya interrupted her subordinate, "Do not bother. Adar seems to already be here."

A small pause came over the com before Eva Khatib replied, "His foresight is quite eerie, quiaff?"

"Aff," Anya slowly responded as she heard the brisk sound of her

cabin door sliding open.

Turning off the com unit Anya looked first to the sweaty, black tank top and shorts she had cast off shortly after entering the refresher unit. Crinkling her nose in slight disgust at the two articles of clothing she turned to exit the fresher, moving past the small cupboard where she kept towels and turning off the light in the process. Without the harshness of the artificial illumination provided by the lights in the fresher Anya quickly picked up on the glow that came from the lighted candles that Adar had brought with him. Catching the faint smell of incense beginning to smolder, Anya looked to where the warrior from Clan Goliath Scorpion, concealed in his traditional Goliath Scorpion uniform, complete with concealing headscarf and cloth mask, stood attached to the floor by the magnets in his boots amidst the dim lighting. Adar had set several spherical containers holding smoldering incense and lit candles throughout the cabin already, the magnets in the base of each container keeping them from floating about the cabin and spilling their contents in the zero-g environ.

"You have had another vision," Adar said more as one making a simple statement of fact than as one asking a question, not yet bothering to turn and face his commanding officer, his voice deep and calming as ever.

"Aff," Anya stated as she moved over to the small closet where her clothes could be found.

Opening the panel to the small closet and then opening one of the drawers that contained some of her clothing, Anya pulled out a loose, gray jumpsuit. It was not that she wished to hide her body out of shame of her nudity or the scars that marred it; she was, after all, a trueborn Clan warrior, not some lowly freebirth adolescent, shame was not something she even remotely considered. Many of her comrades had seen her naked form before. Indeed, both Adar and Eva had seen her body just as she had seen theirs, both from the necessities of the battlefield and from the times she had coupled with one or the other. Sliding on the synthetic fabric of the jumpsuit and pulling the zipper close on the front of it Anya easily noted that Adar had not said anything yet in reply to her confirmation on having

received another vision. However, given Adar's nature that really wasn't much of a surprise.

Star Commander Adar Djerassi was perhaps the only trueborn warrior amongst the Anya's group that could one day return home to the Clans. Unlike herself and Eva, who were to be considered chalcas and criminals, Adar had actually come along in the pursuit of his duties to his Clan. Adar was a Seeker, a position of great honor and respect amongst those of the Goliath Scorpions. As a Seeker, Adar was charged with the duty of finding relics of the Star League throughout Clan Space and returning them to the Scorpion's Temple of the Nine Muses, the most sacred structure outside of their genetic repository given how the temple was guarded by a full Galaxy of frontline warriors. It was his own quest for relics that had brought Adar to give aid to her, his retinue of lower caste personnel and few assistant warriors giving her the means to successfully pursue what she had seen in her vision despite having been condemned by her fellow Nova Cats.

"Your foresight serves you again I see," Anya noted slowly as left off her boots, choosing to remain floating comfortably instead of being magnetically attached to the floor.

Reaching down to deactivate the magnets in his boots, Adar Djerassi simply nodded beneath his cloth facemask in response, his amber eyes catching the glow of the candles.

Not hearing a verbal response from her subordinate did not surprise Anya. Star Commander Adar Djerassi was a perfect example of his Clan, though his willingness to assist her in her venture was perhaps the one exception. Adar, like all Goliath Scorpion warriors, rarely spoke more than a few words and only when absolutely necessary. One had to be a good reader of body language to understand his true intent sometimes, which was rather difficult as Adar wore the standard uniform of the Scorpions and that included the headscarf and cloth mask that concealed all of his facial features save his eyes. However, despite his quietness and attire Anya had found Adar to be quite the boon. He was an excellent warrior, deadly both in a Mech and with the two large daggers he carried as a member of the Goliath Scorpion warrior caste. He had also brought along with him a

personal retinue of thirty lower castemen and four warriors; that those warriors were freebirths was not at all surprising given the nature of the Goliath Scorpions as a Clan, not to mention that their loyalty to Adar and their skills were without question. His retinue and the warriors he brought with him were not the greatest of Adar's assets however. As a Seeker Adar had an almost obsessive desire for knowledge and as such was quite adept at gathering information from people, places, and things as well as being almost a living library of that knowledge. Indeed, if it were not for Adar then there was no way that they would've found the little world of Ayatori and the ancient Star League depot hidden upon it, where the Exodus Fleet had been forced to strip itself of broken and unneeded equipment before disembarking completely from known human space. If not for the material found there Anya doubted that she would've been able to properly outfit those who had followed her upon this quest that even she found to be quite maddening at times.

The swish of the door opening and closing heralded the arrival of Eva Khatib. With her two fellow Bloodnamed warriors, her most trusted subordinates, present Anya decided that she would soon need to begin. However, before she spoke she first reached back into the closet from whence she had pulled her jumpsuit from. Instead of clothing, this time she pulled forth a leather pouch, the container that held her vineers. Vineers were one the greatest possessions for a Nova Cat warrior as they were touchstones to the warrior's past and the events and deeds that had most affected the warrior. For Anya, her vineers told the story of her rise and fall.

"As you have both been made aware, I have had another vision," Anya Rosse stated slowly as she folded her legs as she floated in order to assume the same lotus position that Adar had already taken. "Like several of my past visions this one came not when I sought it, but rather when I did not."

"Your dreams are becoming almost...routine, quiaff?" Eva noted with a hint of a wry grin, her large head and slight stature easily marking her as belonging to the Clan aerospace phenotype. "Perhaps you should cultivate the desire to avoid them in order to experience them more and thus gain further clarification of the path upon which we travel?"

Anya frowned at the suggestion. While she did wish for clarity, so as to find the truth of her destiny and fulfill her goal of saving her people, she was not sure that more visions would necessarily do that. Her first vision had opened the floodgate to the dreams she now experienced and it was because of them that she had made certain choices that had put a death sentence on her head.

"It would be better to know the details of the vision before making such a suggestion, quiaff?" Adar interjected calmly, his amber eyes closed as he floated there as if in meditation.

Noting the prompt of the Goliath Scorpion warrior Anya decided that it was time to tell of what she had seen in her dream.

"In my dream I was adrift amidst the stars. In front of me I could see the symbols of the Scavenger Lords and behind me I could see the totems of the Clans. In between the symbols of House Kurita and House Davion, and just beyond the symbol for House Avellar, I once again beheld the Bronze Eagle," Anya explained slowly, recalling as much as she could of the dream. "The Eagle was tall and proud, it's bronze radiant and clean whereas the symbols of the Scavenger Lords were tarnished and dirty. The Eagle was looking, searching for something, its gaze sweeping over all the Inner Sphere as if it were the master of all it surveyed. I felt the gaze of the Eagle fall upon me and around me, even going through me. Then from the Eagle I saw emerge a knight whose armor was blue in color and bore the make of a devil. Suddenly this...devil knight was in front of me. In its hands was a terrible sword which it raised above its head, staring down at me with eyes of cold blue fire. When the sword fell I cried out only to awaken."

Finishing her recounting of her vision Anya waited for her comrades to respond. Despite the calm atmosphere that the candles and incense were supposed to produce she felt uneasy, a new cold sweat having formed on her body as she spoke of what she had seen. This same sense of unease had come when she had recounted the dream she had received on Antallos. A dream in which she had seen brilliant flashes of light that destroyed all that it touched and then the Bronze Eagle streaking out of the dark void of space to cradle Antallos in its wings

while crushing snakes, rats, and other vermin in its talons.

"The Bronze Eagle...", Eva began, running her right hand through her short white hair in thought, her pale skin almost unseen amidst the snowy tresses, "The same one that you saw in the vision that guided us towards the worlds near the Outworlds Alliance, the same one that you saw in the dream that prompted us to leave Antallos before this unknown force calling itself the GDI arrived to conquer it. Hmm, that you see it again even though we are only a jump away from our raid upon Richmond...this could not be coincidence, quineg?"

"Neg, I do not believe it to be coincidence, but then I do not feel it has anything to do with the raid we have been planning to pull on Richmond," Rosse answered, noting that unlike with Antallos she did not feel the same apprehension when thinking of Richmond.

"Hmm, our raid upon Richmond is to try and see if there have been any more developments regarding this GDI since we raided Gravenhage two months ago," Eva noted, her dull blue eyes closed in thought. "Do you feel that this was a warning against such actions, that a trap lays before us quiaff?"

"Neg," Anya stated as she rubbed her fingers against the rough leather of her veneer pouch. "Unlike the time when I beheld the Red Hunter laying a trap for us, I do not feel that it is a warning against our preparations to raid Richmond."

That statement made both of the Star Commanders raise inquisitive eyebrows. The dream that Rosse had received warning of the Red Hunter had been one full of blood and death as arrows mercilessly fell upon a scorpion, cloud cobra, and nova cat before the figure of a hunter clad completely in red appeared to grind the three totem animals beneath his heel. That Anya did not get the same feeling of warning from this vision as she had from her previous dream could mean that the vision did not warn necessarily of their plans to raid Richmond, but rather of some other future event...possibly one that had yet to even contemplate.

"Looking," Adar stated slowly. "The Eagle was searching."

"Hmm, perhaps," Eva said as she opened her eyes to look at Anya. "From how you described it, the Eagle does seem to be searching for something. If it is indeed representative of this GDI as we have been led to believe then perhaps it is those of the GDI, or their masters, who are searching for something?"

Anya nodded her head. The feeling she had gotten from her vision was that the Eagle had indeed been searching for something.

"You," Adar stated in his deep voice, as calm and collected as ever it seemed. "The Eagle searches for you, for us."

Anya frowned at that. Having the Eagle look for her was not very comforting given her past visions of it. Though to be fair only the second vision regarding the Eagle had struck fear into her heart. The first vision she had concerning the Eagle had led her and her crew towards the Outworlds Alliance and Antallos. She had seen the Eagle then, a mere chick hatching from an egg and yet seemingly strong and proud despite appearing to be a newborn. Even more intriguing than that was that in her first vision of it she had seen images of Terra as well as the numerous symbols for the Star League and the Terran Hegemony. Seeing such symbols had filled her with the hope that she might have finally found what was needed to fulfill her quest and vindicate herself in the eyes of her fellow Nova Cats, not to mention show the entirety of the Clans the truth of their past. However, she had not seen exactly as to where the Eagle chick had made its nest, only that it was somewhere near the Outworlds Alliance and because of that she had needed to begin searching for some sign as to its location.

The raid upon Kesai IV had been carried out in the hopes that the old SLDF depot there, which Adar knew about given his role as a Seeker, would provide clues as to where to find the Eagle exactly. However, upon that near barren desert of a world she found not the clues she thought, but rather the further perversions of the Scavenger Lords as they fought over the scraps of the Star League. From the man captured by some of her savashri hirelings she had learned that the Federated Suns and the Draconis Combine had found the depot long ago and were using it to fuel their near constant feud, stripping it of anything of value that had been left behind by the Exodus Fleet and

fighting over the remains of the factories and maintenance facilities there. She and her forces had dealt handily enough with the green 8th Syrtis Fusiliers Auxiliaries that had been first sent out to meet her, but the main facility had been guarded by the veteran 7th Crucis Lancers RCT and with barely a cluster of troops under her command, most of them being poorly trained and poorly armed pirate ilk she had been forced to contract with as if she were some lowlife mercenary commander, she had decided that trying to gain access to information that had most likely been lost due to the Scavenger Lord's struggles was not worth it.

Following the failure to capture her objective on Kesai she had gone to Antallos hoping resupply and trade the material that had been captured and was of little to no use to her cause. Having another vision of the Eagle while on that forsaken pit of villainy had come as a surprise to her. However, with the second vision she had not been filled with the hope that had come with the first. No, with the second she had seen the Eagle strong and terrible, letting out screams of outrage and anger. Hearing those cries and seeing the Eagle of bronze in full display of its awesome glory had made Anya feel something that was almost completely alien to a Clan warrior; she had felt fear...terrible, spirit-shaking fear.

"If the Eagle searches for us perhaps we should oblige it?" Eva offered tilting her large head to the side in contemplation. "We withdrew from Antallos before learning much. If we had stayed then we may have been able to pry information from that surat Vorax, information that would have helped guide us to our goal. Returning to Antallos and confronting this...*GDI* could provide us with the answers that we seek quiaff?"

Anya frowned deeply at that. While she wanted answers about the Eagle and the GDI that it seemed to represent, as well as the answers and truth that would finally help her understand how she was supposed to save her people, she wasn't quite sure that confrontation would gain her such...at least not yet. There were still too many unanswered questions and she wasn't yet sure what role the Eagle played, if any, in regards to the first two visions she had ever had back when she had still been in Clan Space. All she knew was that the Eagle, for good or ill, was somehow linked to those two visions

and the truth she had discovered regarding the history of her Clan and the Clans as a whole. Until she had a better idea how the Eagle fit into the visions she had seen before she had experienced her first vision of it, she was reluctant to confront it and the group it seemed to represent.

"This blue knight with armor in the make of a devil," Adar suddenly spoke back up, interrupting Anya's thoughts, "That is not something you have beheld in your past visions, quiaff?"

"Aff," Anya answered, "This devil knight is something new. Like many of the things I have seen, I do not have much context with which to place and identify it. All that I know from the vision is that it seemed to come forth from the Eagle, with fire in its eyes and armed with a terrible sword."

"Hmm," Adar hummed in contemplation for a moment. "Until this symbol is identified and the role of the Eagle and its GDI become clearer I would advise that we do nothing."

"Nothing?" Anya stated, a bit puzzled by the suggestion.

Eva did not respond nearly as well, looking rather perturbed as she confronted Adar about it. "Nothing? You would have use avoid these GDI altogether, to run and hide like bandits?! Such a thing reeks of coward-...."

"I do not suggest that," Adar interjected, his tone remaining cool and collected despite the accusation that Eva had been preparing to hurl at him. "I said that we should do nothing. By that I mean we should not purposefully confront the Eagle and that which is associated with it nor should we purposefully avoid it. Should we come across the Eagle or one of its associates by chance then such would be a fateful encounter and we should act as the situation dictates. However, until we have a better understanding of the Eagle, this GDI, and this blue devil, it would be foolish to charge in ill informed of what could await us. As the visions have shown, our unknown enemy is powerful and many while we ourselves are few. If we do not properly prepare then our efforts will be for naught and the Clans will be destroyed by the enemy you have foreseen Anya."

Anya Rosse nodded in affirmation of Adar Djerassi's words as her face paled slightly in recollection of her second vision. It was a vision that came to her just after she had been declared chalcas and escaped the execution of her death sentence. In that dream, the second vision she had ever experienced, Anya had seen horrors she had never thought to imagine. She had seen, oh what she had seen.

Before Anya could make a remark, Adar continued, his gaze locking upon Eva as he spoke, "Bandits...I would suggest that you choose your words more carefully, Eva. Remember the position that you were in when we found you, remember who it is that gave you comfort and shelter when your fellow Cobras abjured you, and remember who it is that you fight alongside even now. Do not allow yourself to fall back into the close-mindedness that marks those who have yet come to understand the truth."

Seeing Eva bristle slightly at Adar's carefully worded rebuke, Anya Rosse wondered if her Aerospace commander might not challenge her second-in-command to a Circle of Equals over it. Eva, had done so in the past and not once had she ever won against Adar, be the challenge a test of warrior skill or actual combat ability. Seeing the white haired woman look between Adar Djerassi's unflinching gaze and the hilts of the two daggers he bore at his waist, Anya knew that Eva was trying to decide whether or not it was worth challenging the Goliath Scorpion Seeker.

"Adar is correct," Anya stated, deciding to head-off the challenge that Eva was contemplating while at the same time reminding the spitfire Aerospace Pilot just what was at stake for all of them. "We are too few in number. Valor has its place, but if we fail to complete our mission then it does not matter how valiantly we fought, for it will be the whole of the Clans that shall perish. We agreed upon beginning this journey that we would set aside our personal honor for the needs of our mission, the survival of those we left in the homeworlds and the awakening of them to the truth. We all accepted the truth we came to know and those who would grant us aide despite the taboos and lies that were once in-grained into us. We can not afford to fail, and if that means that we be patient, then so be it."

Looking to the two fellow Bloodnamed warriors that floated in her cabin with her, Anya saw nods of understanding and affirmation come from each, though Eva's was a bit slower than Adar's was.

"And what of our raid upon Richmond?" Eva asked, letting her dull blue eyes focus squarely upon Anya's own green ones. "We will carry it out still, quiaff?"

"Aff," Anya responded, "The vision does not seem to be a portent against such actions and we have need to gather information. Richmond shall provide us the opportunity to see what has happened since we struck Gravenhage. However...."

Hearing their leader trail off, both Adar and Eva remained silent as they easily read the look of contemplation upon Anya's face. Inside Anya Rosse's head thoughts shifted, formed, combined, were discarded, and then reformed as she put together the beginnings of a plan.

"After we have defeated their garrison and gathered what information we can from its people and its HPG, we shall head to the Elysian Fields to unload those who have contracted with us," the green eyed 45 year old woman stated firmly. "I will want your recommendations on whether or not we will harvest any from this latest group before we are within one jump of the Elysian Fields. It is as you say Adar, we must prepare and that means we have need for more warriors and more equipment. We can not allow weakness and those who fight only for material gain to hinder us in our long term goals."

"Aff, Star Captain," both Khatib and Djerassi promptly answered as they let their feet once again touch the metal flooring of the cabin.

"I believe that I have two who, should they survive the fighting on Richmond, may be worthy of such an honor," Eva stated as she reactivated the magnets in her boots before turning towards the door.

Nodding in acknowledgement Anya did not bother to turn and look to Adar. The Goliath Scorpion Seeker rarely ever spoke of those he thought might be worthy of becoming true warriors, leaving behind the barbarism that pervaded the pirates that Anya was forced to

contract with to help enable her quest. Anya had never really questioned him about it seeing as his codex indicated that before becoming a Seeker he had commanded a Star in the Scorpion's elite Heartvenom Cluster. That elite quality clearly reflected in Adar's choices as he rarely chose more than one or two to be harvested and those that he did choose almost always proved to adapt the most quickly to the new life waiting for them upon Ayatori and then distinguish themselves.

"I shall join you for the briefing at 0400 hours. Alert Hector and Rodrigo that we shall be heading for Elysian Fields after the raid and that they should pass their recommendations along through you as usual," the olive skinned Star Captain noted as her two subordinate commanders left her cabin, catching out of the corner of her eye that the chronometer on the wall already read 0200.

"Aff, Star Captain," the two Star Commanders both answered before the door to the cabin slid shut leaving Anya to her thoughts once again.

Waiting a few moments and breathing in the smell of the incense that still hung in the air despite Adar having gathered up the containers just before he had left, Anya opened the leather pouch that contained her vineers, having kept it in her hands during the entire discussion. Reaching in with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand the former Nova Cat warrior deftly pulled out what appeared to be a small square seemingly made of dark plastic before rebinding the leather pouch and attaching it to the clothe loop on the left hip of her jumpsuit. Similar in size and shape to the codex chip that she wore in the white bracelet around her left wrist the small dark chip was quite unassuming, looking much like any other small data chip that could be commonly found in Clan Space. The key difference between the two was that unlike her codex chip, which contained the information about her genetic information, her gene parents, her victories and defeats, her honors and disgraces, the units she had served with, her general behavior, as well as her rank, this dark chip contained something far more important.

Pushing off the wall slightly to maneuver over to the desk set towards the back corner of her cabin Anya let her thumb rub the smooth shell

of the chip, the fine metal connecting points upon its edges too minute for her to even notice unless she looked for them carefully. Arriving at her desk the former Nova Cat warrior pushed her left thumb down upon a small indentation causing the holoprojector to flare to life as the computer terminal embedded in the desk woke from hibernation. Reaching down with her right hand Anya easily slipped the dark chip into a small groove that was recessed in the front lip of the tabletop.

"Terminal 095BC is online," the computer announced automatically in its dry, mechanized voice. "Proceed with voice recognition."

Anya, quite familiar with the security process that was used on almost every protected computer system in known space, immediately stated, "Anya Rosse, Star Captain."

"Voiceprint pattern obtained and confirmed. Working...", the computer responded before moving to the next security measure, "Password required."

"Lies shall stay their feet upon the false path," Rosse enunciated clearly.

"Working...", the computer responded before stating again in its mechanical tone. "Password required."

To most people the repetition of the statement would indicate that the password had been imputed incorrectly. Anya Rosse was not most people. Only she knew that the reiteration was actually calling for a second, different password that had to be uttered after the first.

"Mind no longer deluded, by false faith concluded," Anya began reciting the second password, "Speak truth so that I may listen."

A silent pause filled the air before being disturbed by the response of the computer, "Identity verified, access granted. Welcome, Star Captain Rosse."

Giving a small shove off from the desk Anya began to undo the jumpsuit that she had thrown on for her meeting with Eva and Adar

regarding her vision. She had a briefing in only a two hours and she might as well get properly dressed for it now. Besides, her private terminal could be operated completely via voice command if desired. She had already inserted the key that held encryption key and programs to access the secrets she had discovered, the secrets that had led to her expulsion from the Nova Cats and the death sentence on her head. It was so much easier to simply utter the commands verbally rather than type them in via the command anyways.

"Computer, open file: Drummond Journal," Anya commanded, as the machine accessed one of the few books that was required reading for all members of Clan Nova Cat and that which no Nova Cat warrior would dare be without a copy. Now it was time to activate the first part of the key that lay in the black chip. "Correlate data with contents of file: Sandra2823."

"Processing," the mechanized voice of the computer announced. "Process complete, awaiting prompt."

Hearing the statement Anya inadvertently turned her head to look to the spot on the lip of the desk where the small dark chip was nestled. Like she had done numerous times before, it was time to get the computer to process the lines of code that held the second part of the key on the small chip and execute the program contained within.

"Command prompt: Override-832.exe," the former Nova Cat warrior ordered, as she shrugged her jumpsuit down to her waist baring her upper torso as she floated over to her already opened closet.

For a moment nothing happened and only the slight noises of the computer working could be heard amidst the ever present noises of the Dropship. The moment, however, did not last long as the scene displayed upon the holoprojector suddenly shifted to that of a man with sharp eyebrows, high cheek bones, and dark hair that had the tips covering the crown of his head all the way to either temple bleached while sporting a thick strip of hair running from the lower lip of his mouth over his chin while the long tails of a dark moustache hung down past it to frame it from either side. Staring out from the holoprojector, dressed immaculately in the uniform of a member of the SLDF Intelligence Command, was Phillip Drummond,

the premier founder of Clan Nova Cat.

"<I bid you welcome, may you glean wisdom from the retelling of the experiences of my life>," the visage spoke in a firm voice that had a mixture of the high English that had been common during the time of the Star League and the rougher accent of someone hailing from the Rim Worlds Republic who descended from those settlers who had come from the old European areas of Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

The greeting was the usual one given with every copy of Phillip Drummond's journal. However, Anya knew the greeting was a ruse, a deception meant to be the last line of security before access to the true contents of the data core she had uploaded to her private terminal here on the Blazing Cat.

"A person can only be loyal to someone they respect," Anya said out loud, repeating the line that Phillip Drummond had spoken when Aleksandr Kerensky had asked why the former Major from the 832nd Amaris Dragoons had forsaken his loyalty to the Usurper and offered it instead to Kerensky himself.

Only a few seconds after the last word of the line left her mouth the visage of Phillip Drummond began to shift and change, the head of dark hair with bleached tips changed to that of a bald pate adorned only with the discoloration of liver spots, the thick patch of a goatee turned white and thinned to barely a wisp as the long tailed mustache did the same. The sharp rise of the brow remained, as did the high cheek bones, but they were dulled somewhat by wrinkles and the gauntness of flesh that looked to be as pale and fragile as fresh parchment. The dark eyes that had once held such a strong gaze appeared so very tired amidst the bunched, pinched flesh of the wrinkled bags and crow's feet that surrounded them. Looking out from the holoprojector was a visage that few Clansmen ever saw or even cared to see; gone was the man looking to be in his prime, replaced instead by one who was in the twilight of his years. At 112 years of age when he had died, Phillip Drummond had not only been the oldest surviving member of both the Exodus and the Founding of the Clans, but also the eldest Khan by far of any Clan, holding and carrying out the duties of his rank and position up to the night he had quietly passed away in his sleep.

"< *Whoever you may be,*" the aged Drummond spoke slowly, his translucent visage in the holoprojector making him almost appear to be a spectre resurrected via some arcane incantation. *"I must commend you for your perseverance in finding the data core and the keys to unlocking its contents. I can not know for certain why it is you initially sought to find the core, nor can I know what you will do with it now that you are in possession of it and its secrets. I can only hope that you are someone who will be open minded enough to listen to what needs to be told and courageous enough to take up the legacy that I leave behind in these passages. If you are not, if you do not wish to know the burden that comes with the knowledge herein then I plead with you to return the core and all of the keys back to whence you found them, leaving them hidden for the day when one who is truly willing to take up the task may discover them. > "*

There was a pause for a moment, but not from any fault of the holoprojector or computer or even the data within. Having seen and heard this opening passage many times, taking great care to examine even the minutest detail from it again and again, Anya knew that the pause came almost certainly from the advanced age that Drummond displayed at the time he had recorded it, a mere week before the last breath had left his body while he slept. However, at the same time Rosse felt that perhaps the pause was also due to Drummond feeling the weight that came with what he was imparting. Anya would admit that when she had first heard the plea from Drummond she had hesitated to continue. It had taken her three full days to make up her mind on whether she should proceed or not, whether she should learn what was on the core that her first ever vision had led her to. For reasons she still did not fully comprehend she had chosen to proceed rather than heed Drummond's warning.

"< *That you are hearing this means that you have chosen to proceed with discovering what lies in the heart of this core,*" Drummond's aged image began again. *"I shall warn you again, however, that what you will learn, should you indeed proceed, could be construed as treason most high and blasphemy most foul, but always remember that it is the truth as I have seen it. This..."*, the recorded message paused again as Drummond let out a wet, hacking cough, *"...this is my journal, a full recounting of my life and the events around it that, in one way or another, I have been a*

part of. I am well aware that, like every other founding member of the Clans, compilations calling themselves our journals have already been produced and distributed as required reading by order of Nicholas Kerensky and those who have taken up his mantle following his demise. However, such works are more pontifications of what Nicholas desired when creating his dogma than accurate accountings of our lives, deeds, and the events surrounding them. > "

Again Drummond was wracked by a series of wet, hacking coughs, betraying that he indeed felt the ill effects of his age.

Having already slipped her jumpsuit off of her hips and pulled her legs free from the material while listening to Drummond's warnings, Anya reached into drawer she had opened to find the black, polysynthetic shorts common amongst Mechwarriors. Made from a blend of synthetic materials the tight shorts were designed to help keep a Mechwarrior cool in the sweltering heat that often pervaded the cockpit of a Mech during combat. Shrugging them on easily enough the former Nova Cat warrior reached into the same drawer again to pull out a tight, black tank top made of the same material as the shorts. Some warriors chose only to wear the shorts when piloting the 12 meter tall death machines, foregoing the tank top or similar piece of clothing in order to feel the cooling vest directly against their skin. Anya had tried it once, back shortly after she had won her first Trial of Position, but had quickly gone back to wearing the synthetic tanks tops after agonizingly finding that the roughness of the ballistic clothe that made up the lifesaving vests had rubbed raw the sensitive flesh of her breasts.

"< To hear me say such a thing must strike confusion and some horror upon you if you are of the Clans...unless I have grossly misjudged how the Clans shall continue," Phillip Drummond noted with a chuckle followed by a short cough before becoming serious yet again. "I pray that I have, that my fears will not come to pass...even though all that I have seen and born witness to fills me with a certainty of what the future holds.... Regardless of what you may be feeling at the moment, know that what you shall find herein is the truth as I perceived it during my life. Unlike what Nicholas and his successors have ordered be transcribed and recorded in the abridged compilations that dare call themselves reproductions of our journals and collections of our history, you will find

no attempts to make any edits or changes to here. No, here you will find my exact words and thoughts as I originally recorded them. The only thing I have added to this, my original journal, is this initial message and the security measures that you have overcome to find this, my most secret possession. Now, let my tale and history be told truly, the ill deeds along with the good, and let me be judged accordingly. The rest shall be naught but sound and fury that, in the end, shall signify nothing. For all that I have ever striven to be is but a righteous man. >"

'Most secret possession' was right. Anya had listened to nearly every entry in the data core at least once so far, something that had taken her considerable time and even now she still felt that she had yet to uncover all of the hidden meanings and secrets that lay within the words of Phillip Drummond. While many of the passages and entries were nothing more than accounts of the day to day there were still quite a number that had been more than shocking and had left her completely aghast, particularly those dealing with the Exodus, the Founding of the Clans, Operation Klondike, the Not-Named Clan, the Dark Caste, and even Nicholas Kerensky himself. The information pertaining to those and other events and people called into question many things that Anya, like every other member of the Clans, had long accepted as unquestionable fact. It was because of her first ever vision that she had located this core, this repository of history that came directly from the eyes and mouth of Phillip Drummond. It was a direct link to the founder of the Nova Cats and all the events that had shaped him and the Clan, regardless of how blasphemous it could be perceived to be.

"You have granted me these visions," Anya said, looking directly to the visage of Drummond in the holoprojector. "In keeping with the lessons you have taught to me, to those you taught your daughter Sandra Rosse, I renew my oath. I swear upon my honor and the blood in my veins, the blood that belongs to you, Phillip Drummond, and to your daughter, Sandra Rosse, that I shall follow my visions no matter where they shall lead me. I swear that I shall carry out your will and legacy. I *will* find a way to save the Nova Cats and all the Clans. From both the blindness you have revealed to me and from the horrors my visions have shown, I shall save them. This I swear."

Looking to the aged image of Phillip Drummond, his recorded

warnings and explanation having finished, Anya knew that no sign of approval or recognition would come from the recording made by the man who had been dead for just shy of 165 years.

"Seyla," the exiled Nova Cat warrior breathed.

Moving over to the desk she brought up the cross-referencing program she had been using to note the different details and facts from each entry so as to make it easier to find information on particular topics and pinpoint entries that were indelibly linked. Looking to the chrono on the wall before catching the burdened gaze of Phillip Drummond in the holoprojector, the 46 year-old Anya set to work. She had just under two hours before the briefing began. She could afford to spend an hour before she devoted her thoughts fully to Richmond and the raid she would soon be launching. It would keep her mind off her latest vision for a little while at least.

New Syrtis Shipyards
New Syrtis
May 27 2007/3022

The first warning that something was about to go drastically wrong occurred with the build up of energy along with the automatically triggered safety lights that presaged a jump on the Interconnectedness Unlimited jumpship *Lucretia*. Under normal circumstances this would be of no particular concern, but normal circumstances didn't include attempting a jump in the middle of a shipyard, well away from any standard, or indeed any known pirate point. The second warning was provided over the course of the next thirty seconds as the attempted jump failed to shut down either automatically or due to human intervention. Frantic commands were sent as the shipyard defenses desperately spun up in an effort to disable, or if necessary take the nigh-unthinkable step of destroying the jumpship to stop the impending disaster.

Space twisted around the ship as the K-F field attempted to form, twisting and buckling nearby structures, which soon gave way under the radical stresses and tore apart, pummeling the surrounding area with debris. Of the ship that started the catastrophe, no trace remained, which was only to be expected.

Offices of Precentor ROM
Hilton Head
Terra
May 31, 2007/3022

The demi-precentor concluded his report "...and as near as we can tell the entire research staff of IU was lost in the event along with their prototypes. The entire shipyard has been completely locked down to the extent that we as yet can't get anyone inside, but visual observations and gossip from the workers who have been allowed on site points to generally catastrophic damage. We're specifically increasing our watch on NAIS and other likely boltholes in the event this is all a ruse, but my section's confidence is high that nothing of significance left the shipyard before the event."

Precentor Style rubbed his chin in thought "While it's a shame that we weren't able to recover any of their work, it's better than having the information available to others. A commendation will be entered into the files of your agents for the diligence of their efforts. Report to Demi Precentor Martes for assignment within the New Earth project."

"Precentor, shouldn't we work to fully rule out any possibility of a subterfuge?"

"John, I have a missing Explorer Corps ship, an entirely unprecedented lost Periphery Colony springing from nowhere, large numbers of cats-paws to replace, and at least two Great Houses that have drastically increased their internal security procedures in recent months, along with the normal workload associated with seeing Blake's Will done. If the IU ship somehow survived the incident, it will have to acquire provisions in the near future, and most likely significant repairs as well, and our agents will be watching for them. We simply don't have enough trusted and competent people, and I don't want your people running afoul of the new security measures they've implemented when we can acquire any needed information by means that don't leave us open to discovery. The Peace of Blake be with you." he said in dismissal. Hopefully that would do the job of smoothing ruffled feathers, the last thing he needed was an internal meltdown in his purview to draw the Primus's ire away from Waterly, especially when he had good news to report to secure his position, if he could just work out the appropriate way to frame the incident.

New Syrtis Shipyards Military Control Zone
New Syrtis
June 2 2007/3022

"I really don't see why all of this subterfuge was necessary." Count Von Steffelbus declared.

"Come now my good Count, playing dumb doesn't suit you. You

clearly recognized the dangers associated with research in these times from the precautions you'd already taken, coupled with the decision to use the defenses of a military shipyard as an additional layer of protection. We simply had advance warning of a plot, and chose to preempt your own emergency escape plan. You'll be receiving large increases in funding and a guarantee of absolute security, and no mention need be made of the fact that your planned escape would have cost billions in repairs along with countless lives."

Briefing Room
Avalon City, New Avalon
June 19, 2007/3022

"-so as of this moment we believe that we've plugged the worst security holes that we've been able to identify." Quintus Allard said.

"Thank you Quintus. Now that we've hopefully set our own house in order, does anyone have any useful suggestions on how to catch up to the Combine in relations to our latest Periphery sensation?" Hanse asked, looking around the table.

Field Marshal Yvonne Davion, looking exceedingly disgruntled, replied "There's no way we can hand over a Battlemech factory. All of ours are currently tasked to capacity, and we don't even have the spare production in the correct engine ratings to make good what the Combine didn't hand over. And we can't even find the right person to bribe to tell us what they do want." she added, looking angry enough to spit fire.

"Hale turned you down again didn't he." Ardan Sortek said, highly amused.

"I don't know what's wrong with the man, we've offered everything short of his own planet and Canopian Pleasure Circus to come back home. And when I had Major Davion hint about offering *that* he started making his own hints about wanting identify a worthy

recipient to receive it instead so he could make sure the planet's inhabitants didn't get screwed over when he stayed where he was." As a chuckle went around the table Yvonne ruefully smiled, and said "All right, as a matter of fact, I'm glad to see him stick to his guns, but his new-found moral character isn't helping the Federated Suns at the moment."

"Unfortunately, Yvonne I rather think that you're making approaches the wrong way, and with entirely the wrong person. I've met young Major Davion, and while I can't say I have any reservations about him, his mannerisms and appearance are likely entirely too reminiscent of a certain recently deceased distant relative that Burgess Hale has no reason to remember fondly. However, it's come to my office's attention that he's been making substantial investments in the ongoing efforts to rebuild and improve Port Krin, along with being the de facto money man behind the so called Foreign Legion, and certain items of interest have come to light." Minister Allard said, leaning back in his chair.

Yvonne failed to entirely suppress an unladylike snort "Which would be why you're the man who's supposed to know everything, and I just tell muscle-bound lummoxes what to blow up first. Don't worry, I'll stop making a hash of trying to do your job for you."

"As I was saying, GDI has certain things that they are looking to acquire in quantity. First is a reliable source of energy weapons, and I've already been directing my agents to help shipments of such along. Second is fusion reactors, and while the larger models needed to be useful in Battlemechs or tanks have been drawing the most attention and which we can't be of too much help with at the moment, they've also been looking for something suitable for their light VTOL attack craft."

Hanse's eyes lit up "And the Federated Suns and Lyran Commonwealth are currently home to the *only* working factories making combat rated reactors in sizes small enough to come close to fitting the need. We cut Achernar a deal to sell their lasers and reactors at or below cost in the needed quantities to GDI, with an eventual eye towards establishing their own factory on Antallos. Meanwhile we have NAIS hit the books looking for ways to build a

new factory to the specifications that GDI requests."

West Point, New York State
United States, Earth
Coalition of Sovereign Nations
9 May 2007

Sally Ryan ran the *Pheonix Hawk* she was piloting down the broad, tree-lined street, avoiding the abandoned cars choking the road as best she could. An enemy *Vindicator* stepped into an intersection ahead of her and raised it's gun arm at her. At the tell tale glow of its muzzle, Sally dodged to the side, just in time to barely avoid the PPC bolt that turned a tree into a fire ball.

Sally had no time to notice as she raised her weapons, and speared the *Vindicator* in the chest with her own mech's large laser. That made a nice little fireball, but hardly inconvenienced the other mech as only armor was blown off.

The range closed. More fire was exchanged. More armor was shed on both sides. But the hit rate was very much in Sally's favor, with the coupe de-grace delivered by a near judo kick that snapped what was left of the *Vindicator's* right leg off at the knee.

Sally was exultant, she was victorious... and she wasn't paying attention when an enemy *Cicada* whipped around a corner behind her and speared the back of her *Pheonix Hawk* with its own pair of lasers.

Everything went black.

With a hiss of equalizing pressure, the canopy of Sally's simulator pod popped open. The rather handsome Captain in charge of the sim looked down on her with a mixture of amusement and sympathy.

"Sorry, Miss Ryan," he said as he helped her out of the pod. "But you just got killed by ammo explosion."

White House, Washington DC
United States, Earth
Coalition of Sovereign Nations

10 May 2007

"So, how'd you do?" Jack Ryan Jr. asked eagerly.

"Better than I thought I did," Sally told her little brother. "I got told that my tactics need work, but that's why we have things like military academies." She picked up one of many pamphlets arrayed in front of her. "They even gave me an invitation to join the US military branch of my choice."

"Cool," Jack said, obviously green with envy. "But how'd you do in the sim? You get a good sync ratio?"

"Sync ratio" had become a well known term among the military and civilian mech fans on Earth. With the revelation that the *Battletech* franchise was based on reality, they had taken a good hard look at just what the technology entailed. Inner Sphere neurohelmet technology for example was required for piloting mechs, but it was an imperfect technology. Some people were simply better at using it than others, being able to synchronize their neural patterns better with what the neurohelmets were looking for. The very best ones almost didn't need manual controls at all, and Sally's little brother wanted to know where Sally fell into that spectrum.

"I dunno, Jack," Sally said slowly. She looked down at the pamphlets in front of her. There were a lot of them, and most weren't from military or even government institutions. "Should I really let one trait define my future here?"

"Sally..."

"Okay, okay," Sally laughed. She looked Jack in the eye and said, "Top 10 percentile."

"Huh, cool," Jack said, impressed. "So you're going to be a mechwarrior, right?"

"Maybe," Sally said doubtfully. "But I'm not really sure the military life is for me. Or hell, I'm not sure it's even the best use for my talents."

"What? Why wouldn't you want to be a mechwarrior?" Jack asked, confused. Then more slyly, he added, "What, don't you wanna be close to your boyfriend..." Sally whapped him with a brochure. "Hey! No physically abusing little brothers here!"

"Tony Dansel is not my boyfriend," Sally told him in exasperation. "Okay, I have... had a crush on the guy and he is easy on the eyes..."

"Ew!"

"...but I've only met the guy once! Once!" Sally said emphatically. She closed her eyes and sighed. "I'm never going to live that party down, am I?"

"Never!" Jack agreed. "But seriously, how come you don't want to be a mechwarrior? It's like the coolest job in the universe!"

"Is it?" Sally asked doubtfully. "Sure, sure, mechs are cool and all that, but I don't think blowing stuff up is what I want to do for the rest of my life."

"So what do you want to do?" Jack asked.

"I want to help people," Sally said. "Have you seen Sullivan's documentary on Port Krin? Better than half the Inner Sphere's like that and more mechwarriors aren't going to fix it. What the Inner Sphere needs are teachers and doctors and engineers, people we take for granted but which they have a severe shortage of. If I become one of those, at least I'll know I'm helping people."

Port Krin, Antallos
Coalition of Sovereign Nations
17 May 2007

Administrators came and went, regimes changed, but the Split Axe tavern endured. The coming of the GDI and the reforms they instituted did very little to interrupt business. Only these days, the clientele now included a good number of off duty GDI and Legion personnel. To the bemusement of the staff, the Split Axe's reputation had somehow spread to Motherlode, attracting not a few tourists as well as military people.

Among the Split Axe's amenities were side rooms for hosting private parties. To Jane Koltan's amusement, the one rented by Major Burgess Hale happened to be the exact same one in which she had not two years ago briefed "Vorax's Army" on their target, Motherlode. Thinking about she and everyone else had thoroughly underestimated the resistance that they'd run into still gave her the shivers some times. It was a miracle that she had not only survived that day, but prospered.

But then again, so had everyone else here.

"So, here we are," Hale was saying to the assembled former pirate band of the Dropship *Drakon*. "Two years ago, we were a down on our luck pirate band barely making ends meet. Two years ago, we discovered what we thought was the biggest score of our lives. And I guess it was that, even if not quite the way we thought."

"Yeah, I heard you're rich now, Burg," Jane's husband, Irdon Koltan said. "Complete with a title and everything. Should we be calling you 'milord' now?"

"Please don't, Irdon," Hale replied with a roll of his eyes. "I've already heard every joke under the suns about that."

"You want I tell a few, sir?" Jankowski added. That was another change, Jane thought. Two years ago, Jankowski never would have called anyone 'sir'. 'Boss' maybe, but not 'sir'. And he looked better

too; military discipline seemed to suit him. "I'm sure I've heard a few you missed."

"Don't you dare, Jankowski," Hale growled. That drew a chuckle from the others. "So what have you guys been up to?"

"Me? I've been up to my elbows in R and D," Dana Zumross said, waving a fork with a bit of steak on it. "I can't really talk about the particulars of what we're doing at the moment, but suffice to say that the Legion is due for a few upgrades in the coming months."

"Ah, you know what I've been doing," Jankowski said. "Lieutenant First Class Ken Jankowski, Legion Mech Ace extraordinaire!"

"Extraordinaire?" Zumross echoed. "Jankowski, have you been taking those correspondence courses?"

"What? I'm a great and mighty mechwarrrior! I don't need no... stinking..." Jankowski trailed off under Zumross' stare. "Yes, I have," he admitted, embarrassed. "But don't you tell anyone!"

"Well good for you!" Zumross said approvingly.

"Huh, really?" Jankowski said, surprised. "So, uh, you doing anything later, Dana?"

"Yeah, I'm going to be meeting with my fiancé later," Dana told him, flashing the ring on her finger.

"Fiance... you're getting married?" Jankowski said, dumbfounded.

"So, Irdon, how have you been doing?" Hale asked, turning away from the chatting former lancemates.

"My lovely wife here has gone and gotten a commission in the GDI," Irdon said with pride, nodding in Jane's direction.

"Yeah, I kinda gathered that from the uniform," Hale said dryly, looking down at his own GDI uniform. "So, Jane, what is it exactly you do for the GDI?"

"Same old, same old," Jane replied with a shrug. "I specialize in Dropship operations. I actually used to teach Dropship operations, but I think I trained up enough people that they can take over. Now, the GDI is developing a new class of... well we can't exactly call them Dropships since they can't use Jumpship docking collars, but they're also too big to be called a shuttle or fighter and too small to be a Monitor."

"Yeah, I think I've read speculation about these things in the news," Hale said.

"Anyway, I'm on the team developing operational doctrine for them," Jane said. "You wouldn't believe how much work that requires given that practically nothing about the weapons load out has been finalized."

"Sounds like you got your work cut out for you," Hale observed. "And you, Irdon? How's 'Motherlode' treating you?"

"Okay, Burg," Irdon replied. "I'm doing... okay."

"What, no details?"

"Well, y'know how it is," Irdon sighed. "It's not like Earth actually needs another infantry commander after all."

"Oh, Irdon..."

"No, really, Burg, I'm good," Irdon insisted. "I'm better than good, actually. I was infantry and I like to think that I was good at being a grunt. But being a grunt was the best option out of a lot of bad ones. Earth's actually provided me with some good options."

"Such as?" Hale asked.

"Ah..." Irdon hesitated.

"Oh, go ahead and tell him, Ird," Jane told her husband. "You love your new job. It's nothing to be ashamed of!"

"I teach Inner Sphere history," Irdon mumbled.

"What?" Hale said, not quite certain that he had heard correctly.

"I teach Inner Sphere history, Burg," Irdon repeated more clearly. "Go ahead, laugh, but I happen to think it's important to know how we got where we are today. It's just as important as knowing math and chemistry and all the technical stuff that Earth has and the Inner Sphere's lost."

"Not laughing here, Irdon," Hale said seriously, holding up his hands in surrender. "In fact, working for the GDI, I like to think I have an inkling for how much everyone in the Inner Sphere's lost too. So what brings you to Antallos?"

"Irdon's got a job at the Tesla Institute," Jane announced proudly. Her husband nodded confirmation.

"The Tesla Institute, huh?" Hale said thoughtfully. "I guess if anyone tries to stage a raid on the place, it'll help to have a bad-ass ex-infantry commander on the staff." He looked around at his people and shook his head. "Amazing what a change of perspective Earth has been," he mused. "Two years ago, I *would* have laughed at the very idea of you becoming a school teacher, Irdon. Now..."

"Now, we get to do what we want to do," Irdon finished for him. "And what's more, we get the feeling that what we do *matters*, that we're contributing to the improvement of the human condition." He shook his head. "Two years ago, I never would have believed it possible."

"Except for those of us that didn't make it," Jane said sadly, her mind flashing back to that day. "Hugo Chin certainly should have lived to see all this."

"Tony Denaro," Hale added in agreement. "Not a bad guy. Shame he didn't join up with the GDI."

"I can think of quite a few people we lost when Mamoto lifted off with the *Drakon's* bay door wide open," Irdon said with a scowl.

"Death by enemy action is one of the risks of the business. Death because people on your own side are idiots and cowards is personal!"

"So whatever happened to our former Dropship captain, anyway?" Hale asked.

"Last I looked, he was selling used cars in Los Angeles," Irdon answered in disgust. "And it looked like he was doing well too!"

"I guess Mamoto's prospering too," Hale mused aloud. "Or at least found a job that better suited his talents." He stood up. "Everyone, I have something I'd like to say." Everyone looked at him expectantly. "Two years ago to the day, we found a Periphery world off the beaten track that looked like the answer to all our problems. And in a way, it was. All it required was for us to get our asses kicked by the locals."

That drew a few chuckles all around.

"So I propose a toast," Hale continued, holding up his wine glass. "To getting our asses kicked! The best thing that ever happened to us!"

"TO GETTING OUR ASSES KICKED!"

Tharkad, Lyran Commonwealth

July 18th, 3022

Archon Steiner hated paperwork. While she knew that only the most important of documents crossed her desk, it was an unfortunate truth that it was still a lot of things she needed to read then either sign off on or otherwise deal with.

So when a small binder from her intelligence agency finally emerged at the top of her inbox, she flipped it open to find a nicely written summary of the densely written submission itself.

Archon, this is a plan to insert agents into the minor periphery power known as the CSN in order to gain additional intelligence on their military, industrial and economical assets as well as political goals.

She read through the file, gave her approval and sent it back, returning to the binder.

And then something caught her attention. A smaller file at the bottom of the binder that did not state any sender, but was marked as important. She opened it and began reading. The first two paragraphs alone were already enough to evoke ample amounts of both chill and anger from her. She immediately called for one of the palace servants.

"Get me Simon. Now!"

Turning back at the file, she continued reading the details about the first part of this lunacy, thinking about ways to stop it. She just hoped to be able to stop this entire affair before it even started.

Part of her mind, though, already thought about how to minimise the damage if the worst possible case came to pass.

30 minutes later

"As you wish, Archon. I will inform them right away. However, I

would still find it advisable to inform the CSN about it."

"No, Simon my decision stands. How would I look to them if I can't even keep my own intelligence service in order? No, this mess is our fault and we will clean it up ourselves, too. And I trust you will find a way to have the people responsible receive their due... *reward* for this."

Port Krin Spaceport, Antallos

November 3rd, 3022

Fumihiko Kitakawa exited the DropShip and stepped on the tarmac. He lazily walked towards the customs area, taking a look at what he could see of Port Krin from his current position.

The interview with a visibly bored customs officer was pure routine. Yes, he was born on Enif, but had left for the Periphery years ago. Yes, he was here looking for work, what with the economy booming after GDI had taken over. No, he had nothing to declare beyond the few private items in his duffel bag. No, he did not have any next of kin available. And so on. A few minutes later, he stepped out of the port office after the officer had officially welcomed him in Port Krin.

He started walking towards the city. There was much to do, after all. He needed an inn to stay for the night. In the next few weeks, he would have to find himself a more permanent flat and a job, given that his current cash reserves were barely enough to survive for more than 10 weeks.

And in two months, he would meet up with nine other newcomers to Port Krin, all of them only having two things in common with him. They were all in their 20's or 30's and, according to their backgrounds and passports, they all hailed from the Draconis Combine...

Ft. Irwin, California

December 3rd 3022

Major Staedele and Captain Johnson were leading the HK representatives to the Cav's armory after spending the last hour

demonstrating the effectiveness of IS-issue body armor and their newly modified XM8s. One of the officials had raised interest in the exact nature of the modifications and the major had agreed to meet up with the Cavs armorer for a little talk.

Entering a slightly chaotic workshop with partly disassembled weapons lying around, they met up with the Cavs chief armorer. 'And true to form', Staedele thought with a glance to his wristwatch, 'he's skipping the break again. No wonder this place is so deserted.' They found Cardan Radics deeply sunk into his work, bowing over one of the TK Assaults. The black-haired man in his 40s seemed to be completely in his element, performing calibrations to the weapon with fine movements of the small tools he held.

The major ripped him out of it rather abruptly. "Would you come over here, Cardan? Our visitors would like to see the modifications to the XM8s you made."

"Of course, boss", he hurriedly answered, surprise still visible on his face. He had met the HK group before the demonstration, but soon excused himself as captain Johnson had been able to carry out everything necessary without his help. "This over here isn't all that pressing anyway."

He gestured the group to follow him to a table holding several XM8s. "So, here they are, gentlemen. The modifications are pretty simple as you can see. We replaced the barrel with a 20-inch one made from IS-standard materials and with an optimised muzzle brake to combat recoil. For the same reason, we installed a small mobile counterweight into the receiver and modified the shoulder rest on the buttstock a bit. The shoulderpad and counterweight are somewhat work-intensive and the rifles have to be recalibrated afterwards, but most of that is so simple, anyone with the proper training could do it easily. That said, I do have to thank your company, gentlemen. Those calibration tool kits that were part of the XM8 sets are marvellous. I didn't have tools that good since my old set from New Avalon was lost a few years ago."

"The ammo is mixed up in the next room, but that's even simpler. Armor-piercing bullets with a steel tip and propellant we imported

from Port Krin, which burns a lot faster than what NATO standard cartridges use. Hence all the work we spent to mitigate the recoil of the weapons. Still, it's far from an ideal solution. 5.56 and similar intermediate calibres aren't exactly popular in the Inner Sphere for exactly that reason. So, does anyone have any questions?"

A few minutes later, one HK official named Schneider asked why there was such a varied mixture of weaponry lying around the workshop. "That's simple, Mr. Schneider," Cardan answered. "We're performing calibrations and modifications to the privately owned firearms of the units' members and dependents during work lulls. Keeps everyone's skills sharp. You can take a look around if you wish. We have quite the collection of both IS and local firearms sitting around here."

"Um, is that over there an AK?" Schneider asked next, pointing at a table in one of the corners.

"No, sir. As prevalent as the old Kalashnikov is throughout human space, we don't have any." The armorer walked over to the table, picking up the gun. "This here is a Ceres Arms Type 28. It's a semi-automatic 12-gauge shotgun based on the AK pattern. Our unit picked up a stock of them decades ago and they're still around. It's based on older shotguns using the AK action, but the Cappies built in some modifications that allow it to accept more exotic ammo, like gyrojets or explosive slugs."

"Wait, Mr. Radics, as prevalent as it is? You mean there's still bootlegs of the Kalashnikov out there?"

"Oh yes. Hell, there must be more of those out there than there are people on this planet. Backwater militias, outlaws, frontier dwellers and the like love them. You won't find them in any decent military, though, with the exception of shotguns and versions chambered in full-size rifle rounds. The Cappellans arm some of their militias with the battle rifle variants. And everyone likes shotguns, of course."

"Just a moment..." Schneider went to one of his colleagues, talked excitedly for a moment and both facepalmed. The man he had talked to picked up his cell phone and went into a corner while he came

back.

"If you would be so kind to tell me what I did say to make you facepalm?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Schneider grinned "Just the painfully obvious, I'm afraid. We're calling Kalashnikov."

"Kalashnikov?", Cardan asked incredulously.

"Michail Timofejewitsch Kalaschnikow. He invented the AK-47."

"Wait, he's still alive on this world?"

"Yes, he is. He is 88, but still alive. And we did not think of it." Schneider shook his head. "Thanks for mentioning it. I'm sure he will use the opportunity to build the successor of the 47 and no one will dare to deny him access to the cores and Star League material..."

Cardan snorted. A H&K Star League Kalashnikov. This would get interesting. Hell, his inner nerd was already salivating.

Von Straub Testing Facility, Hesperus II December 5th, 3022

Florian Pabst was still unsure whether he was dreaming. Sitting in the weekly conference of the project leaders, he was left to his devices as the chief from Department B was summing up the results of their work.

'Half a year ago, these meetings were a gigantic waste of time', Pabst thought to himself. 'And then, we get these news and videos and whatnot from Antallos and suddenly, our little artillery branch gets some real funding. Ha, take that Mechboys and treadheads!'

As the other man had finished his report on the new ammunition types Dept. B was developing, the director of the facility gestured Pabst to go on. He began.

"The testing of the new snub-nosed artillery cannons has been a full

success. They're accurate, they're only marginally less devastating against hardened targets and just as deadly against softer targets as their bigger brothers and our work to find practical uses for them is going along well."

The director asked him a question.

"What? No sir, I fear we're at the moment unable to make the standard HE shells more effective against hardened targets. We had to use smaller and lighter armor-piercing shell caps as the new autoloader systems simply cannot handle shells too top-heavy without major modification that would make the weapons almost as heavy and bulky as the full-sized guns."

"We're trying to work a way around this, but currently, this is the best we can do. As for uses, one of my technicians has made a rather bold proposal. His plan is to use the Long Tom Cannon in a heavy, tracked assault gun as direct support unit for infantry and armor units. We would like to test it out, but for that, we'd need the chassis of one of the new Rommel tanks they are manufacturing in Myoo Mountains."

The director told Pabst that he would petition the central at Myoo Mountains, but that he could not make any promises. Security around Project Desert Knights was very strict and Hermann Steiner wasn't exactly known for his leniency. Pabst thanked his superior and began to describe the progress of the last week in detail.

Port Krin, Antallos **January 16th, 3023**

Like so many other workers from the construction company he was working with, Fumihiro tended to enjoy the evenings in a small bar in the outskirts of the city, close to the apartment buildings the company was rebuilding at the moment. Out of all business sectors, the construction industry had perhaps profited most from Port Krins new management.

Things were looking good for him. Even that meeting with his 'old friends' had gone down a few days prior just as expected.

Right now, he and his colleagues were simply enjoying the evening and watching the news.

Two GDI soldiers were wounded today when an explosion damaged their vehicle during a routine patrol in the merchant district. Five civilians were also wounded, with a sixth person dying during transport to the nearest hospital. A group calling itself the Port Krin Liberation Front took responsibility for the attack in a statement sent to several news agencies throughout the city. As of now, it is unclear who these people are or what their motivations may be. GDI officials to date denied any comments about the affair.

Like most others around the bar, Fumihiro shook his head. At times, it seemed there was no place to go to escape from this kind of petty violence. And now some new idiots tried to throw GDI out of their city, even after they had done so much to revive it. There had been a few incidents like this directly after GDI had taken over the place, but the last few months had been quiet. And now it seemed to be starting again.

Inwardly, however, "Fumihiro" smiled. Things were going according to schedule.

The Splitting Head
Hermantown
Antallos
Periphery
30th August 3022

It was one of the more reputable and adequate watering holes in Hermantown, but given that this was the Periphery and Antallos, that wasn't saying much. The floor was cleaned once a day at least and the barman had relatively clean glass mugs for the piss they considered beer, though they were weathered with age and chipped along their rims. The barman also didn't ever consider using the glass mugs for any customer that looked as if they would start a brawl, and then one had to have a good rep (or what passed for one in this pisshole) and a tab.

The typical denizens of The Splitting Head were either the town's militia (an insult to honest militias everywhere) or as of late since the GDI had taken over Port Krin, pirates who were stuck on Antallos. There were occasionally pub crawlers, locals who somehow scrounged enough C-bills by doing any odd job, who promptly drank it away and threw up in the back alley. Then there were the slaves who hustled about as waiters. The place had a musty atmosphere tinged with alcohol and all a manner of other scents that one honestly didn't want to contemplate.

But contemplation was all that was on Carmela Mcfarland's mind. She sat at her usual table to the side, with a good view of the pub's door, with her back to the wall, swirling her half full beer mug and working up the will to drink the rest. She was uncomfortable and sweat dripped off her short brown hair and onto her dark clothing, with bright robes swallowing her body. The place was bad enough without the drunken men here getting a good look at her athletic, curvy build and getting ideas. She was not opposed to the odd orgy, but a gang bang was not her cup of tea, and gang rapes definitely not. The robes also served to conceal other useful items.

The topic of her contemplation? GDI. Global Defense Initiative, military arm of a new Periphery power officially known as the CSN

or colloquially as Motherlode. She had listened to many a drunken rambling about the new owners of Port Krin for the past week; they banned slavery, they had beaten Vorax and his minions, Redjack Ryan was dead, they had beaten off the concerted attack of four city-states near simultaneously, they were building up the infrastructure of Port Krin, they had access to lostech in some fashion.

That had perked her interest.

'Amazing how much time passes after losing yourself in the Shatter Wastes,' she thought. She had landed in Port Krin with all her gear and her personal Mech, just after Vorax had sent off a veritable pirate invasion off to Motherlode. Thankfully, she had avoided being press ganged into that mess. It wasn't why she had come to Antallos in any event. So she had loaded up with enough supplies to last her nearly two years and drove her Mech off to investigate a lead she had gotten on a Star League Lostech cache somewhere in the southern wastes of the planet.

It had been a rather lonely time only occasionally interrupted by fending off a Zone gang with a few ML blasts. But even that was a rare event, as really most of the gangs weren't suicidal enough to try anything by going against her Mech. So most of it had been spent referencing old Star League-era maps of Antallos, travelling to where the cache might be, scanning with sensors, digging in the desert or spelunking in caves, playing holovid games, exercising, sunning herself and trying to get lucky once again. It had all been for naught. Either the cache had been taken by Kerensky and the SLDF on their way out of the Sphere, or the Dracs or the Feds had gotten their paws on it. Her lead had been somewhat vague anyway; an intercepted HPG message from an SLDF Colonel that had been stationed near the Magistracy prior to the Succession Wars; stating that there were Companies of hidden Mechs on a number of planets and had given their names...data corruption had garbled all but two of them, however.

Finally, her supplies had reached the point where she had to stop her search and begin the journey back to Port Krin to catch the next dropship out. Her route went through Hermantown, and she had been planning to resupply some necessities such as water and food.

That had been done in short order, but the change of ownership in Port Krin and what it represented had kept her from moving on immediately.

Her duty was clear though, and she decided that she had had enough of 'listening' for useful information in this fleapit.

The doors to The Splitting Head slammed open and a man in what passed for the uniform of the Hermantown militia marched over, surrounded by an aura of purpose and authority. Carmela couldn't remember his name, so mentally dubbed him Captain Nobody. The Captain roughly shoved some of his militiamen away from a table, and swept off the drinks and empty beer mugs (these were made of tin, so the barman had no objections). He stood on the table, as the entire bar peered at him in curiosity.

"All right, militia, listen up!" She wondered if the Captain knew what Hermantown's people had come to call the militia recently: maggot; eaters of the dead. Carmela winced as her thoughts inadvertently went to the pyres of dead corpses she had seen outside the city.

"Those GDI pansies are on the move, and they're coming here. A Dropship has landed a hundred clicks to the north and our forward scouts reported an entire Company of Mechs heading this way before they went dark." She felt the tension in the room ratchet way up, and everyone still halfway sober became rigid in their seats. The rest just looked dull and clueless. "Generalissimo Dee orders every militiaman to come to the city's defense. He also...suggests...to any freelancers that they participate as well, if they have any interest in staying free."

Carmela shook her head, he wasn't Captain Nobody, he was Captain Hypocrite or Self-Delusion...she honestly wondered why he even bothered. Freelancer was just a polite way of saying pirate and Generalissimo 'Dreadlocks' Dee, well Carmela was sure the ancient Generals of Soviet Russia were feeling somewhat angry and insulted in the afterlife.

"Anyone refusing to aid in the defense will quickly find themselves regretting that decision." She rolled her eyes at that. "All milita are to report to the barracks! MOVE IT!"

The pub was filled with disorder as the militiamen moved out, or in some cases, slouched out like zombies. The pirates remained seated and those who weren't smashed drunk looked thoughtful. She could imagine all the nasty little plans they were cooking up in the privacy of their minds to get out of this mess. They knew that GDI didn't tolerate pirates or piracy; they were apparently put in a fixed court and 'disappeared'. Carmela didn't know if that was fact or merely dark rumor spread by Dee; she would have to see for herself when she got to Port Krin.

The GDI attack had thrown a bit of a hurdle in the way.

Then she spotted Captain Hypocrite walking towards her intently and he sat down in the empty chair at her table. She already knew what he was going to demand.

"Mc-far-land!" he spoke with exaggerated movements of his mouth, exposing his horrible dental work and she had to fight her gag reflex. He stank of sweat, oil, and fish? Or was that just his natural scent?

"Yes? What do you want?" her voice's tone modulated itself oddly and haphazardly; the speech of the deaf. She could 'listen' as long as she could see the lips of the speaker and Captain Hypocrite had obviously been told of her disability. He was also going completely overboard in trying to make himself understood.

"Ge-nera-lli-si-mo Dee, de-mands your Mech to he-lp de-fend the city!"

"No," she shook her head.

"Did you un-der-stand what I sa-id ju-st now?" the man's posture showed that he was mocking her.

"I paid Dee's tax for berthing my Mech. He can't demand anything and my answer is still no."

He mumbled under his breath, but even an idiot could tell from his body language that he was insulting her. "If you don't the-re will be con-se-quen-ces."

Carmela arched an eyebrow and then without pause, stabbed a combat knife she had pulled from its sheathe through Captain Hypocrite's hand, which he had been resting on the table. She was quite glad she couldn't hear his scream, which was probably rather shrill if she judged by how his mouth was contorting in gaping agony and eyes which were rolling up in their sockets. With a fluid movement she pulled it out, allowing him to fall to the floor moaning, clutching the bleeding appendage to his chest.

She surveyed the bar and saw only smirking and approving glances thrown her way. Captain Stupid had tried to press gang her thinking she was weak, in front of a bar full of pirates. They were in the same position as she was; those who still had Mech's or their lives hardly wanted to waste it to fight for Dee or Hermantown, they only wanted to get away...and that did not involve joining in a battle against a Company of Mechs, and probably a mess of tanks and the devilishly accurate GDI artillery and Free Azami ASF in support.

She contemplated her next move as two pirates took it upon themselves to take exception to Captain Stupid's attempt to dispossess her of her Mech. They clearly wanted to send a visible message to Dreadlocks Dee that such an attempt would not be tolerated, or the GDI would be the least of the Warlord's problems. The two pirates carried the moaning Captain Stupid to the door; one pulled out a sidearm and blasted Stupid's brains out, and chucked the body out into the street.

Carmela saw the group of six militiamen waiting outside for the now deceased Captain recoil as the body was dumped at their feet. She couldn't hear what the two pirates said, but the faces of the militia told the story. They scurried away like chickens in fear.

It was ghastly and barbaric, but that was pirates.

'I should probably just leave now,' she thought. 'No, the GDI will surely have satellite surveillance over Hermantown. They'll spot me leaving sure as sunrise and flag me as a pirate trying to escape.' She also bemoaned the fact that her Mech coming out of Hermantown's direction toward Port Krin would seem like a counter-attack even if

she did escape the GDI advance and the Azami ASF would shoot first and ask questions later. 'Fleeing away from Port Krin is out, not with my duty to the Magistracy...I need HPG access to inform them of my position...'

Her thoughts were interrupted when one of the pirates who had chucked out Captain Stupid, but not the one who had shot the militia leader sat down across from her. She gave the pirate a cold glare at his presumption, but her eyes widened in surprise and astonishment when the man started to Sign at her.

The Signs were unfamiliar, but there was occasionally one she understood. She studied the pirate in a new light...he had the look of man in his late forties, even early fifties. The well muscled arms and upper body, encased in a camouflage pattern shirt showed that he kept in shape. His black hair was graying at the temples, while intense grey eyes showed hard experience and cunning intelligence behind them.

"Sorry, I can only understand a third of what you are signing."

"A pity," the pirate said with a careless smirk. "But then again with the size of the Sphere and the diversity of it..." he shrugged.

Carmela couldn't help her curiosity. "Why did you need to learn?"

"A close friend of mine, a fellow privateer, lost his eardrums when a grenade exploded close to him, luckily the Jumpship had a doctor that could save his life, but there was nothing to be done about his hearing. I'm guessing something similar happened to you...you're speaking as if you once knew how to modulate your voice."

"I lost my hearing whilst fighting off a pirate raid, forced me to retire as a Mechwarrior," she eyed him wryly. "You can't exactly be part of a Lance if can't hear your commander over a radio."

It didn't faze the pirate at all. "That would be a problem," he agreed. "So...what brings you to Antallos?"

"Lostech prospecting that turned out to be a waste of time," she

answered.

"Sorry to hear that." 'I'm sure you are,' she thought. "But right now, you and I share a conundrum, I think. We both want to leave. That means going to Port Krin, but the GDI control it and their forces and allies are on the way here. If we go, we'd run head on into them and we'd look like the enemy, the Azami are fanatical and won't listen to any pleading over a radio. Leaving in another direction would mean going around a long way, but it would be pointless as I doubt we'd escape the GDI envelopment or its satellite surveillance. And I have a feeling that the other city-states will find themselves in similar dire straits soon."

"Are you going to tell me something I don't already know?" she frowned angrily.

"I have a way out of this for both of us."

"Oh, and you'll share it with me out of the goodness of your heart?"

"No, I'm going to share it with you to save my own skin, because my plan needs a Mech, and I'm afraid I'm short one."

"I stuck my knife in Captain Stupid's hand, if you're thinking of trying to steal my Mech...I'll use it slice off something you will dearly miss..."

The pirate raised his hands disarmingly. "That's not it at all, if you agree to take me with you and vouch for me as your prospecting partner, then I'll happily share the plan with you."

She regarded the pirate for a long while, measuring his words and body language before coming to a decision. "Fine, we'll head to the Mech berths where we can have a private chat. You will keep yourself in my line of sight at all times, and no closer than two meters."

"Agreed."

"You have a name, pirate?"

The pirate looked extremely amused suddenly and looked fit to burst into laughter, but seemed to master himself. "Sam."

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Carmela Mcfarland liked to think that she had seen a lot in her travels and trials, first as a battle tested Mechwarrior for the 1st Canopian Light Horse in the Magistracy Armed Forces, then travelling end to end through the Sphere twice over a period of eight years as a Lostech Prospector. But now standing across from a dispossessed pirate called Sam, and thinking through the plan he had just explained to get both him and her out of their respective frying pans...it was insanity!

Yet it had a curious logic to it, nevertheless. It was called 'Lateral thinking'; she remembered it well from her lessons all those years ago in Canopus IV Preparatory – she'd never done well with those confounded riddles and puzzles that utilized such logic.

She idly leaned against the foot of her Mech and met the expectant cool grey eyes that were awaiting her verdict on the plan. "Won't Dee be suspicious?"

"You're a woman," Sam shrugged his shoulders as if it was obvious. "Just say you changed your mind. Saw the light. You only said no because of his threat to force you into joining the defense. It was an empty one anyway, even if he killed you, there would be no way to activate your Mech without your unique brainwaves and the passphrase only you know, and they'd need to take apart the thing to override those safeties... GDI'll be here within two or three hours at the soonest, not enough time for that."

"All right, you've convinced me," she nodded. "It's totally insane, but I suppose considering the situation."

"Trust me," Sam smirked knowingly. "It'll work."

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Generalissimo's Palace

Hermantown

Antallos

In the heyday of the Star League it had been the Hermantown Administration building, from where the 'Administrator' and his staff had ruled over the day to day affairs and bureaucracy of running a city. Now the sprawling twenty floor building was more reminiscent of a rather ramshackle fortress. Barbed concertina wire and fences surrounded it, with wooden guard towers watching over every approach to that barrier. Certain windows were permanently open and the matt black barrels of machine guns protruded out of them. It had been those very guns that had killed the hundreds of people still smoldering in the pyres outside the city.

There was visibly only one way in and one way out, though Carmela thought that there had to be an escape tunnel of sorts too. She and Sam were let in rather quickly once she explained that she was the owner of the Mech in Berth 7 to the guard and wanted to see the Generalissimo. One radio conversation later and that was that.

They soon found themselves on the fifth floor in a large room that had once been a conference facility. Long gone was any sort of expansive table, probably chopped up for firewood. Luxurious high backed leather chairs were not in evidence either, in their place was steel stools. The floor was absent any carpeting, and she felt little bits of loose concrete crack under the soles of her boots. The only thing she imagined that remained of the original conference was the holoprojector, around which a mixed bag of men and women were congregated.

Generalissimo 'Dreadlocks' Dee himself was gesturing towards the holo and talking to his subordinates and allies about the looming battle, "You can see the GDI are takin' their time, advancin' only as fast as their slowest unit, and doin' so in leaps of thirty kilometre' at a time. I suppose it's also to keep 'emselves within range of their own artillery..." Arrogance and malice hung over him like a fog, it was distasteful merely being in the presence of this human butcher; his swarthy features were glistening with sweat and his long black dreadlocks hung like chains from his head. He was clothed in a sweat

shirt and shorts, with a long olive threadbare military overcoat festooned with 'medals' that hung over his shoulders; it was the 'Coat of the Generalissimo', that usually changed hands when the ruling one was overthrown and shot, or if they were unlucky, put into the sex-slave pens. It was what had apparently happened to the previous Generalissima Hernandez.

Dee stopped his explanation when he saw Carmela and shoved some of his followers out of the way so she could see him more properly. A delighted, appreciative smile crossed his features. "Ah Carmela, it's truly a pleasur' to see you again."

"Charmed," she wished she had better control of her own voice, as she had no idea if she had managed to inject the disdain and contempt she felt.

"It's also a surprise, your demonstration in The Splitting Head..."

"You presumed to order me; I'm not under your command. I will act in my own interests, and luckily for you I've concluded that it means my Mech defending Hermantown."

"Every gun on the line will help and is welcome," he nodded. "Come and see. Who's the muscle?"

"I've found an associate, and he's another gun on the line," she said shortly, not looking back at Sam who she hoped was looking intimidating enough.

"Also an extra gun at your side should I decide to ..." he leered suggestively at her. "After all, I've got a company of Mechs an' even acquired some more recently through som' backchannels." Carmela felt her heart begin to race in anticipation, and readied herself to act...the autopistol in the small of her back would take care of Dee and take a good portion of his followers with him in these close quarters before the others or the guards in the corners of the room could gun her down. But at least she would go out fighting and not live as the ugly fuck's sex slave. "But lucky for you, Hernandez has been keeping me very satisfied lately, and the extra Mech's are not as functional as I would like."

With that he fiddled with the holoprojector and focused it on Hermantown and the defenses in place, adding her Mech to the line. She looked at the holo with interest...these extra Mech's Dee had acquired somehow, what or who were these 'backchannels'?

"You see where you need to be?" She nodded. "Good, our radio frequency is nine zero one. Your 'associate' can listen for you. Stay tuned for instructions. Now get the hell out of here."

She didn't need to be told twice. They were escorted by one guard out of the room and headed for the stairs. In the stairwell and passing the third floor, they had to stop because Sam's laces on his combat boots had become undone.

"C'mon, hurry up!" groused the guard, as he was forced to wait a step above the pirate.

"Sorry about this, gotta get new laces..."

What happened next was over so quickly Carmela almost felt as if she had blinked one moment, alive guard, the next moment, dead guard. Sam had pulled from out his boot a thin knife and in a movement as fast as a striking snake, stabbed the guard, first in the throat, creating a new hole for him to breathe through, then promptly kned him in the stomach, bending him over, and stabbed him with clinical precision in back of the neck this time, near the base of his skull.

The dead body slumped to the floor. Carmela could only stare with stupefaction and awe at how quick, quiet and surgical that kill had been. She recovered from her surprise quickly, but before she could ask...

"Help me get him out of his uniform," he began stripping the guard. "I've got something to do in here. You need to leave and I'll meet you as soon as I can at the Mech berth."

"Don't you think it'll be suspicious if I leave without you?" she hissed pulling the shoes off the dead guard. "Not to mention this dead body..."

"Tell the guard post I had to take a leak if they ask you, which I doubt they will," he looked at his watch. "Considering this is the near the end of their shift, they've been standing outside in the sun all day and were drinking...you won't have problems. And let me worry about the body."

"Fine, but we're going to have a talk about this later..."

"Whatever you say, my dear," Sam grinned as he pulled on the guard's uniform jacket.

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Outskirts of Hermantown

Antallos

Periphery

22:30 Local Time, 1st September 2007/3022

A gentle wind formed a rattling sound from some nearby underbrush. It raised hazy slivers of sand from the exposed patches of desert only to deposit them a few feet further away. The wind surged again, picking the same sand up, dumping it further yet; a relentless never-ending march of natural forces, changing the arid landscape over time. Stars twinkled overhead, their ancient light giving negligible light to aid they eye. The natural tableau was abruptly disturbed. With a thundering crash, the sand was compacted with the force of just less than eighty tons of weight.

The gigantic three meter length foot responsible for it, made of exotic steels, myomer and armor raised itself briefly and hit the earth again and again, almost as if it was crushing something underfoot, like a man stomping out a cigarette. This was of course, not the case with the *Orion* Mech the massive foot belonged to. It was in fact, turning on the spot.

The Mech looked over what could only be described as a scene of pure bedlam. Flashes of light from distant artillery lit the hazy horizon like flashes of lightning, giving brief pictures to the unaided

eye. Ten disparate Mechs, their towering twelve meter tall forms advancing in the darkness. The firing of their Autocannons on the line of enemy defenders, the muzzle flashes casting their forms in stark relief, the ear splitting sound from the weapons reached the *Orion* Mech three seconds afterwards. The deep swooping sound of artillery projectiles screaming overhead, crashing into the earth near the enemy line, exploding and sending geysers of dirt and bodies shooting into the air.

Bullets from heavy caliber machine guns blasted towards the attackers from the defending line, the occasional tracer aiding in aim, but it sparked ineffectually off the Mech's heavy armor. It was not the only thing that sought to destroy the attackers, however. Standing behind the enemy lines were yet more Mechs, these were in various states of functionality; some could barely walk and had simply been moved or even buried behind the defensive line to add Medium Laser and various calibers of Autocannon into the firefight. Most shots were going astray in the darkness of the night; mostly due to the erratic and evasive movements of the attacking Mechs, and partly because of poor aim. Occasionally a flare would streak into the sky and allow a new volley of shots to streak across the battlefield from the Infantry manning the Hermantown defense line.

Inside the *Orion*'s modified cockpit, GDI 1st Lieutenant Jan Bonkamp, formerly part of the 43rd Mechanized Brigade, Royal Netherlands Army, completed his turn and began to move forward at a sedate but steady pace of just under thirty kilometers per hour. He raised his mech's arms and two blasts of red coherent radiation from the Medium Lasers blasted into a trench on the flank of the defenders he was advancing on. The Machine gun position there was immolated utterly and then the entire *Orion* shook as he fired the hip mounted Autocannon 10 which blasted an enemy mech that was advancing forward. The Mech...a *Vindicator*, almost fell face forward from the hit, which it had taken on its left leg. It was enough for him to get a good bead on the enemy.

He waited a moment and fired both Medium Lasers, it was a good shot and both beams had tunneled into the chest armor of the *Vindicator*. "Easy on the heat, Jan," his co-pilot, GDI 1ST Lieutenant Ewa Kowalczyk advised, as she managed sensors, target designation

and the internals of their Mech. Not to mention sending up to date targeting data back to GDI artillery units. 'This is so much better than driving a desk in Signals & IT Forces in Warsaw,' she thought with an inward grin.

"I'm keeping an eye on it," Jan snapped. "Urggh..." they both had to shut their eyes to keep the glare of an exploding Free Azami Mech from searing their retinas through the NV system.

"Gswno!" she swore vehemently. "Where did these assholes get all these Mech's from? Intel said one company and I'm seeing a lot more than that."

"How should I know?"

Ewa winced as Jan triggered the Autocannon again. The aim was true this time and it cored the enemy *Vindicator's* armor, they must have gotten lucky with the damage to the internals when it exploded brightly from a breached reactor. "They know we're here now..."

And indeed some of the fire shifted in their direction. Jan kept the *Orion's* torso aimed towards the enemy line, but now moved on a parallel vector along it. A PPC bolt passed right through the space they had been in not two seconds ago. Jan proved why he was in the front seat, when he snap shot the Left Medium Laser and the Autocannon directly back along the path of the offending bolt.

Jan smirked as he saw the enemy Mech responsible lose the left arm it had put over the Hermantown city walls to fire on the advancing Azami/GDI Mech company. More artillery streaked in and zeroed directly on one of the 'pillboxed' Mechs. It was consumed in explosions and earth, reduced to a half buried twisted wreck. He lost that smirk when a Laser hit the left the lower left torso of his Mech; luckily they only lost armor and didn't get a burn through.

Ewa locked on the offending Mech and he triggered an LRM salvo to leap from the *Orion's* shoulder launcher. The Missiles streaked across the eighteen hundred meters separating them in less than three seconds and slammed with successive explosive detonations into its chest armor. A much closer Azami Mech took advantage and blasted

it with three Medium Lasers. The cockpit blasted itself open as the Mechwarrior inside was shot to safety by his ejection seat; his Mech bursting open with the detonation of what looked like an internal ammo explosion.

'Warning radar lock on,' chimed the *Orion's* Earth-made Fire Control computer and a warning tone filled Jan's ears.

Ewa frowned in concentration, her fingers working frantically on the controls.

"Shit," Jan gunned the *Orion* to full speed evasive and the computer helpfully highlighted the source of the hostile radar emissions in his HUD. An entire salvo of what had to be LRMs streaked from a Mech that had popped out from behind a ruined building on the edge of Hermantown.

"AMS on!" She flicked the switch and prayed. "Jebak, my kingdom for a decent ECM," she screamed in frustration

The custom head-mounted AMS whirled to life and a storm of bullets was belched towards the incoming missiles.

One missile exploded a kilometer away, another at nine hundred meters, lighting up the night with bright fireballs. A third LRM detonated at six hundred meters, whilst the remaining three honed in with lethal finality. Abruptly yet more AMS fire joined in the defense from the right flank and finished off two more missiles, allowing their fire to take care of the last, which detonated so close that it almost knocked the *Orion* off balance.

"You're welcome, Red 2," came a voice over the company radio channel. The *Trebuchet* of 1st Lieutenant Alexander Mendez and 2nd Lieutenant Anthony Catelli moved in behind them.

"Thanks, Red 1," Jan breathed a sigh of relief as the *Trebuchet* let loose with all three of its Magna Medium Lasers as it ran. The three beams blasted into the enemy Mech, which turned out to be a *Quickdraw*, with one beam even scoring a 'head shot'. It didn't go down though, until it was peppered with two LRM salvos "How's our

heat, Ewa?"

"Falling like a rock, too bad the cold nights favor the enemy as well."

He triggered the AC10, destroying an enemy armored vehicle that had appeared, trying to fire its AC2 at them.

"Red 1, where are those MBT's?"

"Patience, Red 2, we have to keep their attention focused on us...ah shit. Taking AC fire. Designating target. Sierra 3 Scissor."

"Sierra 3 Scissor, target confirmed." Jan jerked the *Orion* to into a sudden 180 turn, but angled further to open the range between the defensive line and his Mech. Red 1 kept his course and also angled his *Trebuchet* to do the same. They ended up missing each other by a few meters, but completed the Scissor maneuver. The two GDI Mechs torso twisted and opened up with the combined firepower of the five MLs between them on the same target. An enemy *Jagermech* that had been charging towards them blasting away with its numerous autocannons, staggered under the weight of fire.

One beam missed it over its right shoulder, but four laser beams dug into its left and centre torso, leaving barely any armor intact on those sections. Its pilot triggered off another salvo from its four ACs. Two shots dug into the earth a few meters in front of the *Orion*, while the third and fourth managed to hit dead centre. Jan had to fight to keep the *Orion* upright from the transferred momentum and his HUD told the story...central torso armor was at seventy two percent.

The *Trebuchet* rippled off LRMs and Jan slowed down somewhat to get an easier target with the MLs. Two red beams of coherent energy blasted the last armor off the *Jagermech* and Red 1 finished it off by adding its own Lasers to the destruction.

"Lucky bastard," Ewa commented coolly, as the now mangled *Jagermech* fell to the earth without the eruption of any internal explosions.

A whole mess of new contacts appeared on the edge of Radar range,

coming in from the south. The computer instantly designated these in friendly green and they all appeared in the OB screen on the Battlenet as GDI MBTs, twenty four of them in total.

"Suckers," laughed Lieutenant Mendez.

The mixed GDI/Azami Mech Company had bulled straight towards Hermantown from Port Krin's direction to the North East. They had been dropped off by an Azami Dropship a hundred kilometers away, and had made no secret about their landing and intention to attack. Hermantown had orientated their lines and defenses accordingly. What they didn't know was that a GDI Dropship had deposited its payload of MBTs (all of which were now armored properly) at the very limits of their operational range to the south, two days beforehand under cover of darkness and some cunning timed sabotage of Hermantown's primary radar capabilities. Jan had no idea how GDI had managed that feat, but guessed it was probably some nameless black ops soldier that had infiltrated and done the deed.

Jan resisted the urge to celebrate, while yes, it was nice to fool the enemy successfully. The GDI/Azami Company had been reduced to seven operational Mechs, and a glance at the radar screen showed that not all of the remaining enemy Mechs had turned to confront the tank rush from the south.

Four remained and only half of the armored vehicles left as well and the surviving Infantry was staying in their trenches.

Seven to four odds was quite good on paper. The problem was that some of those armored vehicles could pack quite a punch en masse, seeing as they were armed with salvaged AC2s and SRM Launchers. The Infantry was not to be underestimated either, since Jan would bet a month's pay that they had shoulder launched missiles that they would unleash should the GDI company get too close. Then another Mech emerged from behind the city walls to join the defensive line.

He could literally feel himself blanching as he saw the details through his NV.

A gruesome, cruel, squatted down head with pitiless eyes; Lasers bristling on both arms and the gaping maw of an AC20 mounted on the right torso, complimented with LRM20s on the left and two Medium Lasers in the centre. The cherry on top was an SRM6 Launcher.

"Red 1, you see this?"

"I see it, Red 2." Mendez declared grimly.

For a few moments Jan couldn't believe he was actually standing on the opposite side of the battlefield to an *Atlas AS7-D*. His next thought was that if he survived, he'd punch the first Intel officer he saw.

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In the past year or so, the large cockpit of Carmela's *Atlas* had become what she'd like to think of as her small mobile home. The interior of the notorious 'Death's Head' was large enough to fit the various controls for the Mech, the chair, and have room to spare in the back to squeeze in a mattress, portable cooker, holovid player, even some shelving and numerous photos of home, stuck to all the empty surfaces. It also contained items that strangely enough didn't even embarrass Sam, considering their 'intimate' nature, and it was yet another puzzle piece to add to the mental picture she had of him. He also didn't even blink at the revelation of her nationality; the green and purple Canopian three star flag was hanging on the backside of the cockpit and he had simply said, "That explains that."

She even considered asking him to bed her before the battle, but that was too fatalistic. Although she liked to think of herself as a New Hedonist, there were some aspects of that philosophy she disagreed with. Pleasure was something to be savored when the time and opportunity came for it. Pursuing it constantly for its own sake was illogical, and those same indulgences would fast lose their edge if they were too often experienced. *'No, I'll use the promise of that potential pleasure to give me even more motivation to survive in the coming battle.'*

Sam was standing slightly in front of her control chair, within her line of sight, listening to the din and relaying the orders of the radio for her. Apparently, Dee had wanted her *Atlas* to be held back behind the city walls as an 'ace in the hole' according to Sam. This left her view of the battle taking place to be extremely limited. She had to keep her Mech powered down to minimum levels, and send out no radar emissions. All she could see, if she leant forward enough to gaze up at sky, was the flashes of artillery, the occasional laser beam and the white hot blazing lines of AC projectiles streaking overhead.

Then to her astonishment some of Hermantown's Mech's and armored vehicles burst through the gaps in the city walls, heading through the city and towards the south. "What's going on?"

"GDI has somehow managed to sneak two dozen of their new MBTs past Hermantown's notice. They're attacking from the south, and the Azami ASF has achieved air superiority, and is supporting the tank assault," Sam explained.

"Clever, they showed Dee exactly what he expected to see. The GDI/Azami Mech's are here only to draw fire and attention to themselves," she concluded. It was a classic strategy, one very difficult to pull off in the age of radar and sensors. That the GDI could do so spoke well of their martial strategy and tactics.

"Dee wants you to reinforce the weakened main defense line," Sam reported with a wicked grin.

"Then by all means, we shall," she couldn't help but share that grin, as she powered up her *Atlas* completely. With a thought and supplemented by moving the double joysticks forward, one hundred tons of Assault class Mech begun to lumber forward at its walking pace of thirty two kilometers per hour. Each familiar step of the *Atlas* rumbled its chassis, sending vibrations through her body and her little 'apartment' atop the body of one of the most powerful mechs in the Sphere.

She headed for the gap in the city wall and turned to survey the battlefield for the first time. It was a first for her to participate in such a battle with so many Mechs involved. Her own Tour of Duty

had been filled with one-on-one duels and perhaps where two Lances had battled each other out. Now here she was on a field filled with Infantry, Mechs, vehicles, artillery and even ASF.

There was a pause on the field as her Mech walked forward; such was the *Atlas'* psychological impact. It had been a Mech commissioned by Kerensky himself; *'A Mech as powerful as possible, as impenetrable as possible, and as ugly and foreboding as conceivable, so that fear itself will be our ally.'* She remembered that famous quote when she had been asked to name her reward for the return of a Star League Mech cache to the Magistracy.

The *Atlas* had often gotten her out of a fight by its sheer presence alone.

She stopped fifty meters behind the defensive line, the Infantry trenches stretched across her line of sight, and four other Mech's stood in that line, along with the nine remaining armored vehicles. To her left was a *Whitworth* Mech, and beyond that a *Vulcan*, to the right, a *Grasshopper* and a *Jagermech*.

"This is going to take a miracle," she sighed.

"One miracle coming right up," Sam reached into a duffel bag that had his worldly possessions, and produced a midnight black device of sorts, about the size of a broad book. He popped out a thick antenna and tapped a few numbered buttons on it. "You can focus on the 'bad guys' now. GDI won't attack you."

"What?!" she gasped.

"This is a GDI IFF."

"How did you..."

"Fight now, limited explanation later."

She tried to gather her wits and looked out and amazingly enough... he was right, the GDI Mechs opposite her opened up with their weapons again, but the fire parted in front of her and blasted into the

Hermantown lines. Eruptions of dirt as artillery landed in the trenches, and occasionally blasted apart a vehicle.

"Fuck it." She raised her Mech's arms and aimed at the back of the *Whitworth* only a hundred and fifty meters away and triggered all four Hellion V Medium Lasers. The much weaker rear armor offered only token resistance to the firepower, before the destructive energy tunneled into the Mech's internals, destroying everything utterly. Pieces of the Mech were sent flying and its central torso toppled to the ground on one remaining leg.

It was hardly sporting behavior and she supposed that an honorable Drac would balk at such unfair behavior in a Mech battle. But she had to take advantage of every second of surprise on offer, before the remained three wised up. She torso twisted her Mech and carefully aimed on the back of the more distant *Grasshopper*. Her Atlas shuddered as its AC20 spoke.

Again the rear armor was not up to the task of resisting the devastatingly powerful projectile, but it didn't do as much internal damage as she hoped for, and the *Grasshopper* was still on its feet. With a thought she locked on and triggered an SRM6 salvo that blasted what armor remained on the rear left torso and finished it off.

The remaining *Jagermech* and *Vulcan* were seemingly too locked in their own duels with the opposing GDI Mechs to notice anything wrong behind them. But the armored vehicles and surviving infantry were now swinging around to hit her with AC2's and shoulder launched missiles.

Machine gun fire sparked ineffectively off her *Atlas*' armor, but AC2 fire began to whittle on her torso armor. So she turned her Mech's arms and began to blast the vehicles. They were really nothing more than the rag tag equivalent of Swift Wind scout cars, and made a particularly satisfying explosion after just two ML blasts each.

A massive flash of light to her left announced the end of the *Vulcan*, after taking the amazingly well coordinated attack of two GDI Mechs.

The Infantry were now her biggest problem with their shoulder launched missiles streaking towards her. Her torso armor was by now

whittled down to eighty eight percent. She moved forward towards the trenches and turned to walk along their length. Then started to fire her Medium Lasers sequentially, whilst moving her Mech's arms up and down; this was a little trick her Lance Captain had taught her for dealing with masses of infantry when you were in a Mech without a Flamer or any other typical anti-infantry weapon. The effect was that the Laser drew a line of destruction along the trench for the duration of the beam. The blast happened very quickly, so the effect was limited, but it was better than nothing.

She also moved her Mech along the trench and wished that the *Atlas*' feet were narrower. Then she could play 'squish', as it was called semi-humorously among Mechwarriors. But the Infantry had clearly had enough, and soon were pouring out of their trenches in retreat, not that there was many of them left at this point. Half of the survivors died on the way to the city wall and only twenty two men made it beyond.

Finally the *Jagermech* was destroyed and the six surviving GDI/Azami Mechs began walking towards her, trying to keep their heat as low as possible by not running. She turned the *Atlas* to face them and kept the arms pointed to the ground. Whatever Sam said, she would keep her front towards the GDI until they passed her.

Then, to her surprise she saw that he was talking into a small handset that he had pulled out of the black device.

"Oh...you wouldn't mind helping us out in the city too?" Sam asked unashamedly.

"You're GDI," Carmela shook her head in exasperation.

"Yes." Her estimation of the GDI rose up a notch; they had even taken the time to infiltrate an operative. Who knows how long 'Sam' had been among them, sowing the seeds that would cause the fall of Hermantown, and she ruefully realized that she was one of those seeds and what was to say that he was the only infiltrator.

The GDI Mechs passed by her, stepping over the defense trenches and began to file one by one into the city, through the gap in the wall.

Finally she addressed his question. "An *Atlas* doesn't work that well in urban combat, not if you want buildings left over afterwards."

"Hmmm...that is a problem, could you then walk around the city and help out our forces to the south?"

"Will GDI foot the bill for repairing my Mech and ammo expenditure afterwards?" she retorted with narrowed eyes.

Sam nodded. "We'll even have a slot on the GDI Dropship for you, when we return to Port Krin."

Carmela narrowed her eyes, evaluating his body language and eyes. She could see truth but given this man was an operative, and a deadly one at that, who was no stranger to killing, she didn't doubt he could control his body well enough to fool even a learned student of human behavior cues.

"Fine, but there is one more condition."

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Outskirts of Hermantown

Antallos

Periphery

05:50 Local Time, 2nd September 2007/3022

She awoke to warmth. It was of a type she had not felt since a few months before her landing on Antallos; the snuggly heat of another human being sharing her bed. The fact that it was the small mattress in the back of her small home on top of the *Atlas* meant it had forced Sam and herself to fall asleep in a spooning position. Not that there had been much sleeping. She could still feel the lingering tiredness that demanded she sleep more but her dreams had been disturbing and after she had awoken her mind refused to fall back into sleep. So for a long time she just lay there, absorbing the pleasure and feelings of that strong body sandwiched against her.

Her thirst demanded satisfaction at that point, so with an irritated

groan she tried to carefully extricate herself out of Sam's rather possessive hold. It didn't work, she felt him awake, reflexively tightening his strong arms around her before relaxing it after he had gathered his wits.

Carmela stood and stepped out of the duvet, letting it fall back over Sam. She fumbled a bit in the darkness until she reached the small lamp switch, and braced her eyes before letting the light flood the cockpit. Sam instantly pulled the duvet over himself completely and she imagined him groaning in protest. She laughed and stepped over him before pulling out a large water bottle next to the cooker and poured herself a glass.

She stood on the edge of the mattress and leaned her elbows onto the headrest of the cockpit chair thoughtfully, slowly sipping the water, luxuriating in feeling of her thirst dissipating. Her eyes focused beyond the forward viewport. She couldn't see anything of course, due to the lamplight. So her imagination took up the call where her eyes failed.

The battle had been remarkable, at least for her. The hastily assembled defense force that had confronted the GDI tanks, had fled into the city the moment they realized they were about to be crushed in a vice they would have no hope of surviving. Their only chance at survival was to change the battlefield to an urban one, where it wasn't about numbers but more individual skill that ruled the day. It was a good if desperate idea, but one that didn't work against an opponent that had air superiority and could fly about recon drones uncontested.

The GDI Mech and Tank forces invaded, and proceeded to corner every single enemy Mech, no matter where they tried to hide. Sam had guided her Atlas' movements according to the orders of the overall GDI commander, and it had gifted her with another Mech kill; one enemy *Guillotine* that had been attempting to escape out of the city. She had also cut off the attempted escape of two more enemy Mechs who had rather amusingly retreated back into the city the instant they had spotted her *Atlas* blocking the way, only for other GDI units to trap and finish them off.

Once all the Mechs and armored vehicles had been taken care of, from the surviving GDI tanks, rear hatches had opened up and disgorged four man fire teams. To add a cherry on top a GDI Dropship had landed on the outskirts as well, and two entire companies of soldiers rushed out and invaded behind the leading elements. It had overall been a fine display of coordinated warfare.

She really didn't envy the GDI Infantry their jobs now; rooting out any militia strongholds within the city that refused to surrender. It would be a bloody thing, for both sides. Sam had not been worried, simply stating that the GDI had learned from their experience in Port Krin and adopted tactics that had made such things easier and somewhat less bloody, at least on their side.

Attacking the Generalissimo's Palace she knew would be the worst. She wondered if the GDI would simply decide to blow the place up with an ASF strike and not bother with a bloody assault, a fight that would be fought room to room.

The feel of a hand lightly touching her calf and slowly caressing its way up her leg interrupted her morbid thoughts pleasantly. She drank in the sensation until the hand reached her buttocks and quickly caught it with her left hand, and turned around. She grinned at Sam's disappointed expression and let go. She leaned back against the cockpit chair again, and used her foot to push him playfully back onto the mattress.

He allowed it to happen and settled on his side, propping his head up with an arm. His eyes were rather appreciative of the view she was gifting him with, but they quickly turned serious. "Can't sleep?"

"Mind's too busy."

"Isn't that a pain in the ass?" he said knowingly.

Carmela could only nod, and asked the question that had bothered her in the dreams. "What will GDI do now that they have Hermantown?"

"The same as we did with Pork Krin," Sam shrugged. "We'll occupy it

initially; to ensure security and root out the worst elements that ensured the previous status quo. Then it becomes a free democratic city, with a local police force we'll train, courts, the works."

She blinked as that statement tumbled around in her brain. That the CSN was a democratic power was interesting indeed. The Magistracy had always been ruled by a Magestrix, which had always been a woman from the Centrella family. But there were many democratic organs of government; the People's Councils, the Central Committee, drawn from popularly elected representatives from each planet of the Canopian systems and the Canopian Electors, who were elected to eventually decide who would next receive the title of Magestrix. It boded well for formal relations with the fellow Periphery nation.

"The administration of the planet should belong to those who live here. Oh, and we didn't just attack Hermantown," Sam corrected. "This attack was just one of four that we launched pretty much simultaneously."

"Four?!"

"Hermantown, Kronkite, Resortland and Proctor. It's pretty much because we'd had enough. One of those four were responsible for putting Port Krin farmlands to the torch. We'd also been beset with insurgent attacks for months now, and we believe responsibility can also be laid at their feet. Then came word of the atrocity Dee had committed here. That was the final straw. We and the Azami had had enough."

Carmela shook her head incredulously, but then something occurred to her. "Are you attempting to unify all the city states?" It was the logical next step after all, the other cities of Antallos weren't as bad as Hermantown, but they were still nests of distasteful activities and they were all now economically isolated, with no access to trade from any products those four cities had produced. They would become desperate, and either attack if they could, or prey on the other Independent cities.

"That's the idea. We want to unite Antallos to bring freedom and democracy to all of the people who live here while putting an end to

the more barbaric practices in many of the city-states." She nodded, understanding his point. Sam pushed off the duvet, knelt in front of her and took her left foot in his hands. Her eyes fluttered closed at the wonderful relaxing sensations as he massaged it. "But enough of that talk. Now that we're awake, I figure we can spend the next hour or so doing much more *interesting* things."

Carmela stared at him as he continued his journey upward and couldn't help but agree. Tomorrow was tomorrow. Right now there was just her and Sam.

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**Port Krin
Antallos
Periphery
5th September 2007/3022**

Walking away from one of the private Mech Berths after securing her *Atlas* within and arranging to get its armor repaired, Carmela shouldered the large bag which held clothes and other necessities of living. The people and atmosphere she saw around her was like day compared to Hermantown's night. She hadn't stayed long enough in the Port on her arrival to get an impression of it, but if this was what GDI did for a city under its management and protection, then she wasn't surprised that the ordinary people of Hermantown had engaged in that fateful protest action.

The first difference she had seen immediately was the Spaceport as she was processed through it. The place was near completely refurbished; with fresh coats of paint, new windows, small shops selling a rainbow variety of goods and foods, the toilets all worked, there were also now signs helpfully directing travelers to where they needed to go. She had also been required to fill in a form which asked all manner of information (name, age, nationality, planet of origin, did she have the financial means to rent accommodation etc.)

She had been helped along by a fresh faced GDI 2nd Lieutenant assigned to her in recognition of the assistance she had given in the Battle of Hermantown. Lt. Emily Duran looked as if she could've just

come straight from Officers school, but the young woman was very helpful and efficient in getting the paperwork for the *Atlas*' repair done and getting it a new Berth.

The other startling thing that she had seen was an actual holovid news service. The holoprojector had been mounted at one end of the main halls of the spaceport. A pleasant, attractive female announcer was reporting and occasionally the image would be interspersed with combat footage from reporters that were actually embedded with GDI units.

'Insanity,' she thought, trying and failing to imagine a reporter skulking among the 1st Canopian Light Horse. The words the announcer were speaking was also helpfully transcribed as rolling text at the bottom on the holocast. She had wondered if that was purposefully there for the deaf, or just to allow those in the sometimes noisy halls to understand the broadcast even at a distance. Either way, it was very convenient and she had made a mental note to inquire to Lt Duran about the deaf among the CSN and how they were treated.

'...the GDI announced that major combat operations in Hermantown have been concluded, after it had successfully assaulted the Generalissimo's Palace and rooted out the last determined resistance. They also announced the successful capture of the criminal Dreadlocks Dee. He was apparently apprehended attempting to escape at the mouth of a tunnel underneath the palace; a tunnel which had luckily collapsed due to an explosion during the battle.'

'This makes it the second city to fall since the GDI initiated a surprise counter-attack, in response to the August 29 attacks on Port Krin. Resistance in Kronkite and Proctor is proving to be stronger than expected and GDI continues its efforts to effectively liberate those cities...'

The newscast would repeat itself after fifteen minutes, showing it had not been an actual holo-broadcast but simply a looping recording that had been loaded into the projector.

Port Krin's streets were brimming with activity and people. Their faces were serious for the most part (only to be expected given that

there was a War going on) but there would occasionally be a delighted smile, even laughter on the streets. There was also a lot of construction work being done, and she imagined that any business involved in that was simply booming.

Finding accommodation soon proved to be a problem, however. Especially the kind she longed for after nearly two years of roughing it in the small abode on her *Atlas*. She had grown up in a house with almost two hundred square meters and almost an acre of open land surrounding it. Here it seemed she would be only lucky enough to get a sixty square meter, moderately furnished apartment in a nice area of the city within her self-imposed budget. She managed to haggle a rather nice initial three month contract for the apartment as well, with the option to extend to a year if she going to stay for longer, depending on what happened after she sent a letter off to her parents and Great Aunt on Canopus IV.

She had already been composing those letters in her mind ever since she had found herself in Hermantown and learned of the change in status quo on the planet. The news of the CSN emergence had surely already reached the Magistracy by now, but they had not received an on the ground report from a loyal citizen yet, not with the distances involved and the fact that the Magistracy had more important uses of its resources at present than to send diplomats, MIM agents and Doctors on a half year journey of well over eight hundred light years to Antallos.

Yet perhaps the prospect of an exchange of knowledge between the Magistracy and CSN was more than enough to make it worth it. She recalled the solemn event she had seen on the GDI Dropship *Astral Aeon* as it journeyed to Port Krin after taking off from Hermantown.

A critically injured soldier had taken a turn for the worse as he was being carried from an Armored Infantry carrier. The military physicians had put him down right there in the rocking and shaking Mech bay and worked feverishly to save the young man's life, with what they had on hand in their large med kits. Nothing they did worked, even cracking open the chest and performing direct heart stimulation failed. The doctor in charge eventually shook his head, looked on a wrist watch, and wrote something down on a clipboard,

whilst the nurses took on the grim task of putting the body back together. The Doctor had pulled off his blood stained sterile gloves and she could see his countenance of fury and frustration, both with himself and the hostile universe around him.

The medical skill Carmela had seen impressed her. She had followed the Doctor and found herself in the Dropship's medbay. It had taken a bit of fast talking to come up with a plausible explanation for her intrusion. So she settled for simply complaining about a migraine and she was given a mild analgesic in yellow pill form.

But she had accomplished her ad-hoc task.

The Magistracy already traded medical skill in the form of Doctors that were a shadow of what their ancestors had been capable of before the Reunification and Succession Wars. But even that was much better than the non-existent state of medical care on some planets of the neighboring Free Worlds League and most of the Inner Sphere except major House worlds. The medical technology in that Med Bay had in some respects been quite impressive; there had been sixteen beds filled with patients surrounded with screens that were bleeping and blurring all a manner of information to the Doctors and nurses, she had also seen a stocked pharmacy, laboratory, dental capabilities and an X-Ray machine that was remarkably small. There had also been a large donut shaped device, which had a bed sticking out of it, held in a windowed room off the Med Bay. It had the name 'Phillips' and 'CT Scanner' emblazoned on it.

What it did she had no idea. But she knew that surrounding her was a level of medical technology that was in some respects the equal of what Canopians could produce. If the Medical minds and technologists of the CSN and the Magistracy could come together...it left Carmela breathless at the possibilities.

There was indeed a wonderful opportunity here.

Dates to be determined.

Townhouse, Fort Belvoir, Virginia, USA.

The cab pulled to a stop, and he made his way slowly up the walk to the townhouse, bone tired. Anyone who claimed that being the public face of a (supposedly) charitable group was enjoyable were nothing but damned fools. It was rubber chicken dinners, rude lobbyists and hidebound governmental functionaries. He paused.

There was something off. He paused, and brushed his sports jacket as if to flick off some dust. That the same motion also loosened the High Standard derringer in his pocket - currently disguised as a leather wallet - wouldn't be noticeable to most people.

There were no scratches on the lockplate of the door. A professional job, then. Though that wasn't saying much for the area around DC - you couldn't toss a pebble across the sidewalk without hitting a dozen covert agents from as many different agencies. The best way to deal with an ambush was to spring it on your own terms. With that firmly in mind, he threw the door open as if he were totally oblivious, and headed for his den.

"Before I drag you in, would you like to tell me why Erik Prince, his two bodyguards and his driver were all admitted to Bethesda with severe chemical burns to the face and shoulders?"

"And a very good evening to you too, General Clark."

"Would you like to answer the question before or after I drag your ass in."

"I'll take 'before' for \$500, Alex."

"This isn't Jeopardy, boy."

Ed sank slowly into a nearby chair. "I just got back from dropping those idiots off at the ER. As for why? If someone threatened your family and stuck a gun in your face, what would YOU do, Clark?"

Clark's grim expression grew darker. "You expect me to believe that the CEO of a major international corporation threatened you?"

"Expect, no. Tell, yes. Look a little closer, and you'll find that the NA are making some dollars in the right places, General. The Buron Cav already made Prince look like a fool, and on top of that, he's hungry. He had the audacity to ORDER me to carry a message to the NA, to tell them that he was their new boss, and he'd be dropping by to audit the books, collect some 'donated' money, and examine the stockpile of weapons the NA were going to supply to Blackwater, gratis."

John Clark stared at the younger man, trying to see the truth. "And how, exactly, did he and his men end up with chemical burns? Care to explain that?"

Ed raised his hands as if in surrender, and nodded towards the heavy watch on one wrist. "Ever had dinner with a *bhut jolokia* pepper, General?"

Clark winced. He'd made the mistake of biting into one of those while in India. "Pepper spray?"

"Calling this stuff a pepper spray is like calling a Davey Crockett a cigarette lighter."

John sighed, and made his way to a seat across from Ed. "Care to give me the full story before I have Jack jumping down my throat for not delivering your head on a silver platter?"

Ed carefully lowered his arms, watching Clark warily. When no reaction was forthcoming, he rested his hands on his thighs.

"The ass showed up, had his bodyguards wave a bug detector around, and once his mooks assured him there were no bugs that might record anything embarrassing, Prince opened up with his 'here's an offer you can't refuse' speech. When I told him to take his offer and stuff it, he began to hint that family and friends could get hurt if I didn't convince the NA to make him their new leader, and one of his

thugs tried to look menacing by touching his holster. That's when I let them have it with my watch."

Clark eyed it professionally. "Nice. But it doesn't look like there's enough of a charge in there to take out the three of them."

"No, but it hurt, and gave me the moment I needed to reach for the paintball pistol in the desk. Tiberius T-8 with a vertical feed magazine and loaded with pepperballs. Bhut jolokia, all of them. They each got a pepper ball to the face, and a second when they kept trying."

Clark grimaced slightly with involuntary sympathy. The *bhut jolokia* pepper was rated at one million Scovill units, roughly 400 times hotter than a bottle of Tabasco sauce. "I'm surprised you let them live."

"I'm trying to cut down on the dead bodies," Ed said sardonically. "Burying them in the garden is a strain on the back, and I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Funny. Not. And the driver?"

The younger man gave a grimace of his own. "I called him in to help his boss and the thugs to a hospital. He went for his piece, instead. I had to drop him, too. Their pieces are in the trunk of the limo, which I left in the hospital parking lot, from which I just returned."

"And why'd you take them yourself?"

"I was trying to keep it out of the press."

"You failed."

"Y'think?" Ed noted dryly.

"Covering this shit up is going to be a stone cold bitch. Explain to me why Washington should do it."

That got Clark a snort as his reward.

"The idiots scanned for electronic bugs, old man. Ever read William Gibson? He said *'If they expect high tech, go low. If they expect low, go high.'* That's what I did. They were expecting and looking for 21st century bugs, not 19th." Ed opened a cabinet, and Clark swore softly at the sight of a fifty year old Dictaphone.

"Mechanical recording? You think that'll be admissible in court?"

"No. But it's enough to turn over to you, and make those bastards sweat. Why will you even want to use it? Well, I have a few treats for you and Jack, courtesy of my friends in the NA." Ed slid a manilla folder across the cabinet. "Take a look and enjoy."

Clark flipped through the photos, and smiled approvingly. "Lovely. Walther Arms WA 2000. One of the best sniping rifles in the world. Pity so very few were made. In .300 Winchester magnum, I take it?"

Ed nodded. "It's back into production, thanks to certain 'investors' who are funding it directly. It'll be provided to GDI forces at less than half the production cost. The rest can be considered a 'donation' to the cause of Earth's continuing freedom."

"When you really want to reach out and touch someone," snarked the spook.

"When you care enough to send the very best," finished Ed. "Check out the next couple pages."

Clark did so, and raised an eyebrow. "Semmerlings?"

"Yup. In .45 Colt and a new version in 9mm *Parabellum*. Because they're as small as a .25 auto - even smaller than some. But still pack enough punch to get the attention of someone even if it's wearing Inner Sphere body armor. At close range, of course."

"And you'll subsidize these as well?"

"Pilots, tankers, 'mechwarriors and any GDI personnel whose MOS requires them to serve in tight spaces yet require some final

emergency backup firepower that'll knock someone on their arse."

"Nice," Clark noted reluctantly. "Anything else?"

"My 'friends' have invested in American Derringer Incorporated, Springfield Armory, and a number of other specialty armories. As soon as they can bury the files deep enough, the FP-45 and the 9mm Deer gun are going back into mass production. That probably won't be for another five years, and they won't go off-planet until the CSN-

"For which, read Jack Ryan," interjected Clark.

"Yeah, yeah. They won't go off-planet until Jack approves. Once he does, though..." Ed paused and gave Clark a level look. "The Combine's the biggest threat to Earth. And aside from the CSN, the second biggest thorn in the side of the Combine are the Free Azami. Not that I'm implying anything, of course."

"Of course," Clark echoed blandly.

"Finally - at least for now - a classic. I think you'll like it. Check out the last pic."

Clark flipped to the end of the folder, then hummed happily. "De Lisle carbines? They're rarer than hen's teeth. I know some friends who'd like to get their hands on one."

"Well, now they can. New production. Along with new manufacture Welrods. Mass production models, but still up to the high standards of yore. We're updating the metallurgy and the technology, but when a design survives for decades on its own merits, you don't abandon it lightly."

"Sweet. How soon can my 'friends' get a few?"

"How soon can you make the Blackwater idiots go away?"

"What Blackwater idiots?" The grin on Clark's face was cruel.

"Большое спасибо"

"*bú yòng xiè*. Still got any of that Jack Daniels? I think it's time to sit down, have a drink or two, and enjoy someone else's humiliation."

"Works for me."

A couple of shots and a little *schadenfreude* later, Clark frowned owlshly. "Why the Azami, kid? They'll just cause trouble with the Combine, trouble we don't need."

Ed grinned fiendishly. "Because we're going to ask them to sell the weapons instead of using them."

"Eh? Mind running that one by me again?"

"We want trouble as far away from us as possible, right?"

"Right."

"Like, for example, on the *other* side of the Combine?"

Clark blinked. "What's on the other-- ah!"

"That's right. The formerly free Principality of Rasalhague. Hard core bastards who want nothing more than to regain their freedom from the Combine. And if a crapload of weapons happened to just sort of accidentally fall into their hands out of a Free Azami dropship, hey, that's not *our* fault. And any trouble they start is on the other side of the Combine, nice and far away from us, pulling troops and resources in the opposite direction. Help the Rasalhague to split from the Combine, and the Dracs will be so busy trying to get it back, the Free Azami will have more maneuvering room to attempt their own secession."

"That's twisted, evil, and sounds effective. I'll say it again, kid. You're a sick fuck, and I wish I'd recruited you twenty years ago."

"Nah. You'd probably ended up having to shoot me."

"Only in an arm or a leg. You can spare one."

"Says you."

They sat together in a companionable silence, sipping their drinks. Ed raised his glass, staring into the whiskey as if it held a deep secret.

"I'd like to ask for a favor, John."

Clark raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What is it, and how much will it cost us?"

"Just a delivery, John." The younger man stood up carefully, and walked over to a cabinet set into the wall. Opening it, he removed a bottle with a card tied to its neck. Clark's eyes widened slightly.

"Mortlach 70?! Where the hell did you get that? That's not even supposed to be available any more!" John Clark knew he was in the presence of distilling history. The seventy year old bottle of Scotch whisky sitting on Ed's desk cost as much as a small car. Single bottles had sold for as much as \$17,000.

"Don't ask. You don't want to know. Really. But I need to give this to someone. Trouble is, I don't know who. But you can find their name for me, Clark. That's all I ask. An address I can send this to, confident that the right person will receive it."

Clark didn't like the direction this was going. "So, how do you expect me to find someone when you don't even know their name?"

"I know what they did, John. And I want to thank them for doing it. May 23, 1989. The forest outside Celle, West Germany."

A fact clicked into place. "Jesus, kid! Don't you ever let go of a grudge?"

"No."

Clark sighed. "Look. I'll ask. That's *all* I'll do. Once. If I don't get an answer, I'm dropping it. And you're going to owe me big for this."

"Fair enough." Ed closed the cabinet, set his glass on the desk and nodded to his guest. "I'm almost drunk enough to get to sleep without remembering. The guest bedroom is up the stairs and to the right. Or you can call a cab. Either way, I'm going to turn in. Take care of yourself, old man. I gotta do another rubber chicken dinner this weekend, and then I'll have some more reports for you and Jack in two weeks." He turned and made his unsteady way out of the study and eventually to his bed.

The general sighed. Some people couldn't let go of the past. Pity. The kid could make a good operative, if he would just let go. He picked up the phone on the desk (bugged - he'd been the one to order it so) and called a cab. He had quite a bit to bend Ryan's ear with tomorrow. Jesus, finding a retired KGB case officer was going to be a royal pain in the ass...

~ * ~

Townhouse, Fort Belvoir, Virginia, USA.

One week later.

The lecture tour was murder. Ed couldn't understand how politicians managed it. He *sincerely* wanted to throttle the blue-haired cougar who'd tried to come on to him at one after-lecture dinner. Though he had to admit that, for someone in her sixties, she was still quite the looker.

"Pity the plastic surgeons couldn't install a functional *brain*," he muttered under his breath. He aimed a death glare at the pile of unopened mail waiting for him on the desk in his den.

"Junk, junk, more junk." Perhaps he could suggest that spammers and telemarketers be added to the "better off dead" list maintained by the NA? Then one envelope leaped out at him. No postmark. Hand delivered, and the address ink-jet printed. Anonymous. He eyed it carefully, and after several minutes of inspection, picked up an old East German bayonet that had been ground down into a letter opener and cautiously slit it up one side.

A single sheet of paper. He shook it out, donned latex gloves and unfolded it. It wasn't signed. It didn't need to be.

Anatoli Knyazev.

A promise made is a debt unpaid.

"Thank you, Clark."

Pirate Trials
Sweden
Earth
September 2007/3022

Etsuko regained her composure quickly and cursed herself for the loss of face. Despite being a mere clerk this was the most important assignment of her young life and she would not foul up the simple task of setting up an appointment.

"I'm sorry, did something alarm you?" asked her host.

"No. I- I was surprised for a moment by the photo on your desk, it is quite realistic."

"Huh? Oh yes!" said her host beaming. "Yes, yes, we took it on vacation last year. Those are my two daughters and my husband. I've never seen them so happy, magnificent creatures."

This made sense, every child in the IS had a period where mythical creatures ruled their fantasies. Apparently these Motherloaders indulged them with doctored photographs.

"That they were, I suppose you have images of them riding unicorns and grasping dragon's teeth as well."

"I'm not sure what you mean"

Trying desperately to remove herself from her folly Etsuko added quickly "The fantasy you portray for them, no child can ever have it of course but it must be wonderful to pretend."

"Pretend? We did this on our trip just last year. Would you enjoy a chance to meet them? I'm sure something could be arranged during your stay."

Startled, Etsuko sputtered "Bu- you mean that this is not a doctored

photograph, that you hav- that there are still living-?" She could not bring herself to finish the sentence through the stop in her throat.

"Yes, not for much longer I daresay, but we're hopeful we can turn things around. I'll make the arrangements shall I? Now, I don't mean to be rude but I have very pressing matters, I will meet with your attorneys first thing in the morning."

Etsuko left in a daze. *They couldn't, could they?* There are creatures burned deep into humanity's collective memory, mythical beings of supreme beauty. That some had once been real only enhanced their mystique, and, for the denizens of the Combine, the crushing cultural shame at the role they had played in wiping them from the universe. Where young boys might battle Tyrannosaurs with their toy mechs, young girls would dream of the Iruka.

There were so few attempts, and they never took to other planets. We didn't know the numbers had dropped so far until they were doomed... And then the Usurper and the destruction of the genetic archives...

But these motherloaders are a lost colony are they not? From how far back? Far enough that they might have brought some with them? Could they have flourished on this miracle planet? Could there still be a chance?

All concern for decorum lost she broke into a run. She could not contain herself; she had to tell the others, to share. She was going to live the dream of every little girl in the inner sphere.

I'm going to meet a Dolphin!

**White Sands Missile Range,
Earth, Sol II System,
January 1, 2008/3023**

Technicians and scientists swarmed over the device the facility was going to test today. An experienced Mech technician would recognize it as yet another Medium Laser, but there were some key differences. For one, it was a model that hadn't been produced in the Inner Sphere in several centuries. For another, the focusing lens was different from the original model.

The theory was simple. Upon examining numerous lasers salvaged and brought back from Antallos, numerous scientists, assisted by Star League engineers, noted that the lenses weren't as precisely cut as they might otherwise be. Speaking with the Star League engineers confirmed that the focusing lenses used for regular lasers often went to the lowest bidder, thereby 'excusing' the poor quality. The purpose of today's test would be to see what effect, if any, a better-cut lens would have on the range and power. An alarm began to sound, signaling everyone in the vicinity to crowd behind blast screens.

"Experimental Laser One, Shot One firing in three... two... one... Firing." A beam of super-concentrated light reached out and impacted the cubic-meter chunk of BT-grade armor, set at what would be considered long range for a standard Medium Laser.

"We have confirmed impact. Wait for results." A camera focused on the target, which was set on top of a weight scale, recorded everything.

"Data confirms. We have a clean burn, consistent with medium range for this type of laser. No noted increase in heat produced. Increasing distance to target. Let's see just how far our new flashlight can reach."

As they waited for the target block of armor to head to maximum ER Medium Laser range, one of the Earth-born scientists turned to his Star League compatriot. "Did the Star League ever do this kind of thing?" The Star League engineer shook his head.

"Not really. From what I recall, we usually just rebuilt the laser to accept more power. Roughly the same results we're seeing here, but it produced a lot more heat-per-shot." He rubbed his beard. "If a better lens can increase the shot range and power, then, assuming the two modifications don't interfere with each other, if we increased the power the laser could accept..." The Earth-born engineer nodded in understanding.

"Then we could be producing Extended Range lasers that outdo anything the Successor States could try, *especially* if they're not looking at the lens when trying to duplicate it."

"Experimental Laser One, Shot Two. The target is at what is considered maximum range for an Extended Range Medium Laser. Firing in three... two... one... Firing." Once again, the beam of super-concentrated light reached out and touched the target without apparent effort.

"Results are in. Shot is consistent with long range for Extended Range Medium Laser. Congratulations, ladies and gentlemen, we're looking at the first Extended Range Medium Laser produced in the Inner Sphere for *centuries*. I know the Mech jockeys in GDI are going to be happy about this once we start producing them! What a way to ring in the new year!"

Cheers rang out.

"Don't rest on your laurels, though. Next week we're to start figuring out how to make combat-effective Pulse Lasers!"

Port Krin
Antallos
November 10th, 3022/2007

Erich Koslovski straightened his blue uniform of the German Federal Agency for Technical Relief, or THW for Technisches Hilfswerk, to calm himself down as he glared at the man in front of him, trying to keep his bearings. He wanted to go over the desk and shake some sense into the man, but that would cast a bad light on him, the THW and by extension to Germany.

Two months ago he had arrived on Antallos with his and several more THW Technical Units to help rebuilding the infrastructure.

And as a side project for his everyday employer, the Ruhrkohle AG, he was working to find a few mineral deposits. And he had done so. It had taken some time and the help of a friend, who happened to be geologist, but he had found a nice deposit of copper, aluminum and, more importantly, germanium. Sure they were about five hundred meters below the surface, but, being born in the Ruhr Area, that was not much of a problem for him. Especially as he was a mining engineer outside of his job with the THW.

But apparently it was a problem for the man behind the desk.

GDI might have fired the old bureaucracy, but apparently some members of the new Port Krin bureaucracy didn't learn. This was about as bad as dealing with people of the IRS. And all to get a Licence to mine the deposits

"Es ist schwer unterhalb von einhundert Metern zu fördern," the maybe 27 year old man of Lyran origin said again, speaking in German. (Its difficult to mine below 100 meters.)

Erich breathed in deep and looked around for a moment. Willy was standing a little distant to him, trying not to get involved, while a Japanese looking man observed them with interest.

"Getz hömma zu, Freundchen," Erich said and his glare intensified.

"Versuch nich' mir zu erklä'n wat geht und wat geht nich'. Mein Urgrossvatter wa' Kumpel, mein Grossvatta wa' Kumpel, mein Vatta wa' Kumpel. Ich bin Kumpel. Mein Sohn is Kumpel. Ich und mein Sohn haben auf Prosper-Haniel unter achthundert Meter gearbeitet. Und du wills' mir erklä'r'n dat ich dat nich' gemacht hab?" (Listen, boy. Don't try to tell me what works and what doesn't. My great-grandfather was collier, my grandfather was collier, my father was collier. I am collier. My son is collier. My son and I have worked on Prosper-Haniel below 800 Meters. And you want to tell me that I didn't?)

The man stammered something, looking straight at Erich and tried to come up with a response.

"Vielleicht," he tried. "Aber völlig unrentabel." (Maybe, but totally unprofitable.)

Erich had to give him that through. The last few mines needed some subventions from the state, considering the cheaper coal from other countries. But still, he kept on glaring.

"Wir ham mehr als 5 Millionen Tonnen Kohle pro Jahr gefördert," he said. "Und einige Zechen fördern mehr." (We have dug up more than 5 million tons of coal per year. And some mines dug up more.)

The man paled and muttered something under his breath. Erich just kept on glaring. This boy was trying to stand up to someone from Bottrop? No chance.

"Wat is getz mit der Lizenz? Brauch's du ne' Einladung?" (What about the licence? Do you need an invitation?)

Behind him the Japanese man raised an eyebrow and decided to talk to Erich later on.

GDI Motorpool, Port Krin, Antallos
March 16th, 2007/3022

Natalie stepped carefully over a half-disassembled technological fobbit and into the state of organized chaos that characterized Dani's workspaces. Her technician friend had just arrived on the latest dropship from Eart-*motherload*, and the diminutive blonde had already made herself at home.

The air here smelled of a combination of ozone, sweat, and melting plastic; Natalie had to restrain herself from gagging. Dani was like her little sister, but damn if the girl wasn't going to get herself killed one day tinkering with tech. The room was dark, but every few seconds, she could see the blue-white strobe of a plasma torch go off towards the rear of the workshop. When it did, she could just barely make out her blonde friend, wearing a blue technician's jumpsuit and a welder's mask over her face.

Natalie walked closer, avoiding several pieces of machinery and doodads that cluttered the concrete floor. Distantly, she wondered if all technicians were like this. Certainly all the ones she knew, but then, she obviously knew but tiny portion of them. Probably not enough to draw any conclusions.

"Dani?" Natalie asked.

She saw her friend look up and thumb off the welding torch. Dani's hand swept up and removed the mask, revealing her grease-stained face. "Hey, Nat. Nice of you to drop by."

"What's this you're working on?" Natalie asked, peering closer. It didn't look like armor. She was still amazed that anyone was braindead enough to send tanks here without protection. It was hilarious. Or rather, it would be hilarious once she found Greene. Tanks without armor? It was the perfect teasing material, oh yes.

But this didn't look like armor. She had no idea what it was, of course. It was a gray box, with thick black pipes coming off of it. Beer cooler maybe? Maybe, but Dani wasn't much for liquor, as far as

Natalie knew. She was more of a social drinker. Both of them were, come to think of it.

Dani blushed beneath the grease and replied "It's a personal project."

"Oh?" Natalie asked, intrigued. She leaned forward to get a closer look.

"Yeah. It's a freezer. Or it will be a freezer, when I'm done." Dani replied.

"For...?" Natalie asked.

"What?" Dani asked, seemingly distracted. Natalie narrowed her eyes – there was a strange smile and far off look on her friend's face. "Oh, uh, for anything, really. Mechs, tanks, planes, trains, automobiles... Not a food freezer. See, I know those League freezers inside and out from working on Mel. Now that I've finally got some decent resources, I'm trying to see if I can't make my own, with maybe a few tweaks."

"I see," Natalie replied. "Now are you going to tell me what's really going on? I know you, Dani. There's more to this than just a little excitement at finally being able to tinker."

Dani bit her lower lip, as she did when she was deciding whether to tell Natalie something.

"Well, there's this GDI scientist I met on the jumpship over, and he's really interested in how mechs keep cool. So I thought I'd show him a real working freezer. But, of course, we don't have any since they're all back home. So since I don't have a freezer here, I have to make one myself!" Dani replied hastily. "Don't look at me like that!"

"I see!" Natalie grinned, rubbing her chin in thought. "Is he cute? Is that perhaps why you're so interested in this little "personal project" of yours?"

Something flashed across Dani's eyes. It looked almost guilty, but it was gone before Natalie could really register it.

"Yes, yes, make fun of me. Just because I've maybe found a guy who's actually interested in the same things I am. Tell me, dear Natasha, how's the Greene Machine?" Dani asked sweetly.

"Oh damnit, not you too!" Natalie replied. "Come on, Dani, don't encourage him. Please, no more terrible name puns."

"Why? He's not here to hear them. Probably. He did drop by earlier, and he said he'd visit again." Dani replied with a smile. "But I notice you didn't answer my question, Nat."

She hadn't, really. She briefly considered lying, but Dani was one of the few people she kept no secrets from. They'd been together from the beginning. Besides, even if she did lie, Dani could tell.

"It's... complicated." Natalie replied, fishing for the right words. Yes, complicated fit. Anton Greene was a very strange man. He could be warm and funny, cocky or brash. At other times he was cold, and she could almost *see* the emotional walls go up. And then there was the fact that he hadn't once made a serious pass at her. Not one grope or proposition.

She wasn't sure if she should be flattered or insulted. She wasn't sure what she'd do if he actually did such a thing, either. On one hand, she'd feel safer. Men who want her for her body are a known quantity. They're easy to rebuff or lead on as needed. But on the other hand, there was something... pleasant, in the way Greene treated her. It made her feel special, and wanted. Not lusted after, but genuinely wanted, like he were saying "I want to spend time with you as a person and not you as a set of holes I can fill."

That was one hell of a novelty.

Come to think of it, how many times had he actually touched her at all, even casually? Hmm. There was that time getting out of their mech's cockpit, but she was certain that was accidental, since he'd slipped. And that was more her touching him anyway, reacting on instinct to keep him from breaking his damn neck. So what if her hands managed to find their way to his rear? It was the most obvious

place to grab him!

Not that there was much to grab. Like all the soldiers she'd seen in the GDI, he kept himself in shape. Sometimes she'd seen him running early in the morning with Brox and Major Dansel. Yes, Greene did go to great lengths to keep his body toned.

What else? Well, there was the dance. But the dance was hazy. She couldn't decide how much of it was real and how much was the liquor mixed with her own dreams.

And then there was-

"-Nat? Hello? Are you going to answer my question some time today?" Dani asked.

"Sorry. Uh... I can't exactly say how things are going between Greene and I. I've never had a relationship like this before. Hell, I'm not even sure it is a relationship, or if I'm just imagining things." Natalie replied hastily.

"Oh, the interest is definitely there. Remember how I said he came by and chatted? What exactly do you think we talked about, dear Natasha?" Dani asked with a smile.

"Me?" Natalie asked, blinking in surprise and missing the incorrect name.

"Yup. Amongst other things." Dani replied coyly.

"Oh? Like?" Natalie asked, eager to change the subject.

Dani bit her lower lip again. "I've been trying to get a feel for what Earth society is like. Nat, I've seen what these people are. I've seen what they can do. And to be honest, I like what I see. Err, not that I've got my eyes on Greene or anything."

"Yes, well, see that you keep it that way!" Natalie replied, doing her best impression of a Lyran stereotype.

Dani laughed. "Seriously though, back in the successor states there's so much fighting, but nothing ever changes. I see mechwarriors die all the fucking time, but it doesn't make a bit of difference. If anything, it just contributes to the downward spiral that is our existence. We smash tech that can't be replaced just to keep it out of someone else's hands. You know the Star League used to have thousands of mechs like Mel? Top of the line assault mechs with all the trimmings? But all the factories are smashed and all the stockpiles are depleted. Natalie, it's been a long time since I've had any hope for us as a society."

"Where are you going with this?" Natalie asked.

"These Earth people have an air about them. Maybe it's innocence, maybe it's naivety, I don't know. But Nat, it's damn hard not to get swept up in their optimism. They believe they can change the sphere. And looking at things here on Antallos... I think maybe they're right." Dani replied.

"Come on, Dani, it hasn't changed that much. So we've got a decent contract, that's no cause to leap on the revolutionary bandwagon," Natalie replied. "What can one planet, no matter how rich, do against the whole inner sphere?"

"Natalie, you know I grew up here on Antallos. The changes I've seen... Well, even two years ago, I'd have never believed them possible." Dani struggled for words. "I was convinced -*convinced*- that nothing here would change. I resigned myself to the idea that my only chance to escape being the fucktoy of some two bit pirate was to get off the planet. So I signed up with you. I never imagined things might change here. I thought the best I could hope for was a life of sailing the stars."

"Come on, it couldn't have been that bad, could it?" Natalie asked. "We had good times, right?"

"Nat, you've never lived here," Dani frowned. "You're a mechwarrior with a very big mech. You never saw how it was for the little people. If you don't have the power to defend yourself, you're nothing here on Antallos. But that's all changed. *They* changed it."

Natalie caught the passion in her friend's eyes. "Slow down, Dani."

Dani sighed, "They're the first people I've seen with an actual plan for the future. I've seen glimpses of that future here on Antallos. Nat, I want to be a part of that future."

"Dani, aren't you being a little melodramatic?" Natalie placed her hand on Dani's shoulder. "They can't even armor their own tanks."

Her blonde friend chuckled. "I'm helping them with that, actually. Attaching armor to the tanks, that is. They're very nice tanks when they aren't naked. I saw the specs. Of course, we don't necessarily have enough armor for all of them, but I'm doing what I can. It feels good, you know? The Earthers aren't perfect, not by a long shot, but they're good people, and I wouldn't be against throwing my lot in with them."

"They're one little baby fish in a huge, huge pond. I don't want to see you disappointed." Natalie replied.

"Nat, all my life, I never knew people such as this existed. They've given me hope. When was the last time we had any of that?" Dani replied, looking up at Natalie.

To an observer, it would have been a very sisterly gesture.

"I'll admit, it's been awhile. But-"

"-But nothing." Dani said. "Nat, here in the periphery, Merc units have two options. We can get extraordinarily lucky, or we can circle the drain and eventually collapse. You know this better than I do. We've even had to resort to piracy just to keep afloat."

Dansel's words came back to her. *"Consider where you'll be in ten or twenty years in the future."*

In that dark, brutally honest corner of her brain, she realized Dani was right – the whole company had been circling the drain. They wouldn't be around in twenty years. It'd be a miracle if they lasted

ten. They'd already had to strip the Roger's weapons just to keep the bills paid and the mechs in working order.

"You know I never liked raiding defenseless planets, but we always tried to avoid taking too much. I didn't like the idea of leaving all those people to starve any better than you did." Natalie replied. It sounded like a lame defense even to her ears.

It also wasn't entirely true, as her conscience was quick to remind her. She'd been at least partly blinded by greed on the motherload run.

Definitely not one of her finest moments. On the other hand, if she hadn't signed on to attack motherload, she'd have never *met Greene*. Natalie ruthlessly suppressed that thought and replaced it with the much simpler "never landed a decent contract."

"Nat, this is a second chance." Dani replied, only partly ignorant of her friend's mental debate. "We don't have to do any more of that. We've finally found someone worth throwing our lot in with. Nat, I think this was our big lucky break. I mean, if we'd gone to Earth second, we could have gotten nuked. That's pretty lucky, right?"

Natalie frowned.

"Come on, I know you. You don't enjoy the mercenary life any more than I do." Dani added.

"It pays the bills." Natalie replied hastily.

"Yeah, but that's just not enough for me," Dani replied. "It didn't used to be enough for you either. What happened to the idealist who was like a sister to me? I think maybe its time for her to come back out. I miss her."

"But what about everyone else? What about your staff? What about Captain Blue? What about my lance? We can't just disband because you want to, Dani. If you want to go, I won't stop you, but it wouldn't be fair to the men to disband without discussing it with them."

Dani nodded. "I've already got Brox onboard. He loves Earth culture, and he was considering signing on with the legion full time when his contract was up anyway. The rest? Just give me some time to work on them. I can be awfully persuasive when I want to be."

Natalie sighed. "I'll think about it."

"Promise?" Dani asked. "I'd hate to leave without you. It'd be so lonely."

Natalie smiled. "Promise."

And think about it she did, even as she left Dani's workshop. Though not all the way; Antallos' sun beat down relentlessly, so Natalie paused in the building's doorway, in the shade.

There were certainly pros to Dani's idea. She wouldn't have to spend each day wondering whether she'd need to skip meals to scrounge up enough c-bills to resupply. Nor would she have to worry about running an entire mercenary company. Well, more like a lance of mechs and a dropship, but she wasn't one to quibble over details like that. In truth, the boring logistics of mercwork didn't really interest her. She much preferred the rush she got from battle.

And she'd get to spend more time with Greene. But there were cons too. Joining the legion permanently would mean giving up some of her freedom. It was a wonderful feeling to be able to go where she wanted, when she wanted. But then, it'd been a long time since she'd felt free like that. The pay, of course, probably wouldn't be as good as mercwork, though the real expenses in her life – mech maintenance, ammo refills, et cetera et cetera – would be provided. They probably wouldn't pay to feed her chocolate addiction, but she could pay that herself.

But, of course, the biggest downside was that she'd have to spend more time with Greene. He made her feel special, sure, but he also made her feel vulnerable. And she *hated* feeling vulnerable.

"Why hallo thar!" Greene's face literally appeared inches from hers, though his was upside down. And he had the strangest thing attached

to his face. It looked like a handlebar moustache, but there was no damn way he'd grown it since yesterday.

"Greene!" Natalie roared, stepping back. "Where the hell did you come from?!"

"Simple, my dear! I was hanging in the rafters! Still am, really. Brox taught me how, and so, like any good interstellar ninja assassin, I dropped down upon my unsuspecting prey!"

Natalie blinked and took a breath. She must have been getting desensitized to his antics if that didn't get to her. "What's with the moustache?"

"It's my disguise! There's reporters about, and they're eager for an interview with anyone who knows the major! One of them is really persistent. She's found me thrice so far. Doesn't she realize that no means no?" Greene replied, looking around warily a bit towards the end.

"What's wrong with that?" Natalie asked. Inwardly, she was surprised. She'd seen Greene grin as PPC blasts and missiles rained down on them, and she'd seen him grin as he hijacked her mech out from under her... Not once had she seen him genuinely scared of anything. Or, if he was, he hid it under his veneer of cocky insanity.

"Natasha, have you dealt with reporters? Besides lawyers – who I'm convinced are all actually soulless evil robots – reporters are the lowest and most malicious form of life. I have every reason to be scared."

"Oh come on, quit being such a big child." Natalie replied.

"If you want, you can hide up here with m-Journalist senses tingling! Quick, Natasha, save yourself!"

"Ah, Lieutenant Greene. So nice to see you again!" The reporter's voice, for it was surely a reporter, was rich with promises and passion. It was a pleasing female voice, with an air of erotic poise mixed with but a tiny hint of vulnerability and need. It was the kind

of voice that had men falling all over themselves in hopes of being chosen, marked like a some goddess' sacrifice. Natalie was well versed with that voice. She'd used it, when the situation called for it, though she much preferred less degrading methods of persuasion. Using her body to get ahead rubbed her mechwarrior sensibilities the wrong way.

Natalie turned to stare at the reporter. Her beauty didn't escape Natalie's notice; the reporter's hair was jet black, and her eyes were wide and what most would consider an entrancing shade of green. She was tall, too, though not quite as tall as Natalie herself, and beautiful in a very classical sense. *Very* beautiful in a very classical sense.

Two other things also failed to escape Natalie's notice: The way the reporter seemed to ignore her, and the way the reporter's hips seemed to sway as she walked. She recognized that sway, oh yes. That was sway of a predator, of a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Natalie's eyes narrowed. She took an instant dislike to the woman.

"Oh, uh..." Greene started to reply. He'd already dropped down from the rafters and landed next to Natalie, and he looked ready to bolt at any moment. "So sorry, but you simply must have the wrong person. I'm not this "Lieutenant Greene" fellow, though I'm sure he must be handsome indeed if you're comparing him to me. I, my dear lady, am Lieutenant Wallace *Breene*. I can see how you'd get confused, as our names do sound very similar. But surely you've noticed my moustache? I can assure you that I'm totally not your "Lieutenant Greene.""

Natalie glared at Greene for a moment, but didn't give voice to her thoughts. *"HER Lieutenant Greene? Greene, you are **so** not that bimbo's toy!"*

The reporter stepped forward, clearly invading Greene's personal space. Why, the tramp was mere inches from his face! Even from this distance, Natalie could smell her perfume. Flowery and rich and sensuous. The most infuriating thing, though, was the reporter's smirk. This was a woman well versed in getting men to dance to her

tune.

"Then perhaps you could help me, Lieutenant Breene." Natalie hated the way "Breene" rolled off the bitch's tongue. It sounded far too close to "Greene" for her liking. "You're with the GDI foreign legion, aren't you? I can tell by the uniform. Why don't we go somewhere more private and discuss how we can help each other? I'm doing a piece on Major Dansel, and surely you could help me?"

Then, worst of all, that floozie stood on her tip toes – Natalie was glad that at least she was taller than this wench – and went to whisper something in Greene's ear.

He shot Natalie a look, one that screamed "help me! Heeeeelp me!"

Or at least it had *better* have been a cry for help, for his sake.

Natalie did want to see him squirm, but she certainly didn't want to see him debase himself with such a woman. So she cleared her throat and said "I'm sorry, but Lieutenant "Breene" and I were already on our way to the simulator. Given how hard it is to get time on the sims, your private interview will have to wait. Now if you'll excuse us..."

The reporter blinked and looked as if she was noting Natalie for the first time. Her eyes looked over Natalie's figure for an instant in clear appraisal before she spoke.

"I'm Lois Lane, with the New Avalon Times. And you are?"

Natalie met her gaze. "Natalie Fischer, GDI Foreign Legion."

The two stared at each other. Neither wanted to give in first.

Natalie's fist tightened, then loosened, then tightened again.

She was about to say something when she felt something warm engulf her hand. She looked down – breaking eye contact with that tramp despite herself – and saw that Greene had captured her fist in one of his own hands.

"Come on, Natasha. Practice is a-waiting, eh?" Greene said, leaning in so that only she could hear and giving her hand a gentle squeeze. Then, louder, he added, "So sorry, Miss Lane, but as my colleague said, it's a terrible bother rescheduling sim time."

Lane smiled and nodded her head demurely. "Of course. I'm sure we'll meet again, Lieutenant Greene. I still want to hear all about what it's like serving with the illustrious Major Dansel."

Natalie saw right through Lane's act, so rather than let Greene reply and perhaps say something unfortunate, she entwined her fingers around his and pulled him towards the legion's training facility.

Something felt indisputably right about the warmth in her hand, though she'd never admit it.

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Danielle Dumas – Dani to her friends – held up two dresses she'd acquired back on Earth.

Not Motherload, but Earth. It was still so amazing. An actual copy of Earth somehow showing up in the middle of the periphery. If she hadn't seen the proof with her own eyes, she'd have never truly believed it. In fact, she wasn't sure if Natalie did even now. Then again she *was* a lot more flexible than her best friend, at least when it came to beliefs.

To be honest with herself, Earth was a Motherload. It had a wealth of technology, sure, but far more important to Dani was its wealth of knowledge. She'd gone on Vorax's little expedition expecting to find a gaggle of richer than average peasants. A bunch of neobarbs with lostech they could be divested of. Instead, what she found was striking: They actually knew how their technology worked! They could make more of it and they could change its specifications on a whim! They had engineers, actual engineers who knew how and more importantly why everything worked. It was amazing. She'd heard about such people, all in the employ of Comstar or one of the great houses, deep in secret facilities. She'd never actually expected to meet any. And then the Earth engineers had asked Dani, little

technician Dani, to help them learn even more.

Which of course brought her back to the dresses.

"Would he like the red or the white, do you think?" She asked aloud, not truly knowing the answer and not truly expecting one from the empty room. One Earthier scientist in particular had captured her interest. Dr. George Randall was exactly the kind of guy she liked; tall, with a nice smile, caring eyes, and not to forget, a great ass. He was also very intelligent, yet another huge plus slash turn on in Dani's mind, and he was even interested in learning about Inner Sphere technology. So they even had something in common to talk about.

Dani knew his specialization was in lasers, but she also knew that he was interested in how heat sinks functioned too. Fortunately, Dani was well versed in the practical realities of both. Most importantly of all, he was currently unattached, or so he'd told her over drinks on the way over. Poor guy had caught his wife in bed with another man a few months before they left for Antallos.

Despite how much sympathy she held for anyone in that situation – such wanton sluts gave women everywhere a bad name – Dani did not give pity screws as a general rule, no matter how much she might want to. She was strictly monogamous and only had sex in a relationship. But if on their first date he was to be seized with a sudden and irrepressible urge to have hot and sweaty sex, she wasn't about to refuse. And it's not like she wouldn't do what she could to encourage such an outcome.

Which of course brought her back to the damn dresses. Which dress was more likely to get him thinking about how to get it *off* her? Red, or white?

Her thoughts encountered a fatal interruption when she heard a knock on the heavy door that separated her room from the rest of the legion's dormitory.

Fuck, he had better not have been early. She'd only just showered and gotten the grease off. She didn't have her make up on, and she

was just wearing a T-shirt and panties. Definitely not what you want to greet a potential guy in. Not so early into a relationship, at least. Maybe when they knew each other better and she felt comfortable just skipping the date and pulling him into her bed straightaway.

Dani checked the peep hole to make sure it was in fact him. Seeing that it was, she popped the door open just enough to stick her head through. "Hey! You're early. I'll be out in five, maybe ten minutes tops."

Screw it. Might as well go for broke. Red it was. She quickly shed her T-shirt, slipped the strapless garment on, cursed Natalie for having generously large breasts, and then sprayed a bit of perfume on her neck, arms, and what little cleavage she had. A few moments of makeup application later and she looked pretty good, albeit more than slightly rushed.

Then she went out to meet her date.

He was tall, just like she preferred, and his hair was a sort of rusty auburn color. His face had a few lines, but they lent him an air of distinction. Plus, she suspected they were from stress rather than age. His physique was nicely chisled; it was clear he kept himself in shape, but he didn't have the brutishly bulging biceps of some guys. His muscles were more compact, to use a word.

He kind of reminded her of the mechs she worked on, actually. Physical power, but with a certain class and style.

And a certain physical clumsiness that kind of disproved the analogy. He wasn't a warrior, he was a thinker, and it showed. Good thing she went for that kind of guy. Nat might chase after other mechwarriors, but Dani preferred a man who could discuss particle projection theory even as he gave her a wonderful massage after a hard day's work.

Speaking of which...

"Come on, I have something I wanna show you." She said, tugging on his hand and dragging him out of the barracks and towards her new

workshop.

Something in her grin must have been infectious, because he started smiling too, though it wasn't quite as wide or energetic as hers.

Oh well, there'd be time to work on that later. In Dani's experience, the only thing most men needed for a good smile was a good lay. And in her not quite unbiased opinion, she was a very good lay.

But ego gratification had to come before physical pleasure. She'd finally finished her little "personal project", and now she simply had to show it off. She simply knew he'd be impressed.

Hopefully. Assuming it was still working when she arrived. It *had* been making those discouraging noises since she activated it, even if technically it did radiate just as much heat as she hoped. Err, most of the heat she hoped. It wasn't a true double heat sink, it was more like a heatsink and a half. Still, it worked! She'd made it with her own two hands, and she just knew Georgio would like it.

Even if he didn't necessarily like her pet name for him.

Hmm, Greene must have been rubbing off on her more than she'd thought. That was exactly the sort of thing he teased Natalie about.

Dani carefully led Georgio into the motor pool and past an unarmored tank that was raised on a platform for maintenance. First thing in the morning, Dani would be right back here attaching whatever scraps of armor she could scrounge up to make it ready for fighting.

"I heard about that," Georgio said, looking at the tank. "The military shipping in a unit of tanks without their armor, I mean. I guess you're the one they got to fix their mistake?"

"One of them. I'm just one technician out of many here. But yeah, I'm going to be working overtime getting those tanks ready, or at least as ready as I can. But come on, what I wanted to show you is back here." Dani replied.

Her date looked bemused, "You know, usually it's the man who's leading the beautiful woman to the dark back room before murdering her."

"Murder? Who said anything about murder?" Dani giggled, then eyed his body appreciatively. "That would be a waste. Oh yes. Ah! Now, take a look at this, and tell me what you think."

She flicked on the lights, bathing the workshop in an intense white light. She pointed to her freezer, and watched as he ran his hands over its surface. She could just imagine the glide of his fingers over something considerably smoother and softer – and warmer. Perhaps he'd take a hint and bend her over that cold metal surface. The dissonance between cold metal and hot flesh would be very interesting.

Dani unconsciously licked her lips at the thought. Maybe later.

"Hmm," He said. "I want to say it's a heat sink, but I don't recognize the design any, and I looked over most of the ones we salvaged back during the campaign for Earth before I came. From how excited you are, I'd say this is something special, am I right?"

Dani smiled. "Oh yes, very special."

"It's larger than the ones I've seen. So that makes it a... Double heat sink?" He asked.

Dani nodded. "Keep going."

"Uh..." He started. The poor man looked stumped. "You pulled it out of one of those star league wrecks they've been digging up?"

Dani's grin faltered. "No, nothing like that."

"But if not there, where did you get it?" He blinked. "Unless..."

"Yes?" Dani asked, nodding eagerly.

"You actually *made* this?" His left eyebrow crept steadily upwards.

"And I doubt you'd show it to anyone if it didn't work."

Dani bit her lip. Well, technically she wasn't sure it was working now at this moment in time. But it had been, and that's all that matters!

"It's not as effective as a real freezer." Dani hastened to add. "And it's more of a personal project; I doubt we could mass produce it. But I figured that with all the work I've done on freezers in the past, I could try my hand at actually making one. Just to prove to myself that I could. Plus, it's a hell of a thing to put on an engineer's resume."

"Oh? After my job are you?" He asked.

"No! No, nothing like that!" Dani replied. Then, blushing, she added "After we met, I started thinking. I figured "Why not try something that'll impress this fine specimen of masculinity?""

He chuckled. "You have at that. But this... We only met last month."

Dani shrugged "I've been working on the idea on and off for years now. With your Earth computers, I made what I hope is a decent working design. Once I had that, it wasn't too hard to actually make the thing... Okay, what's so funny?"

"Sorry, it's just the way you said "your Earth computers", it reminded me of all those TV shows I used to watch as a kid. The ones with the aliens who were just people with a bit of body paint or plastic ears." He replied. "But seriously, it's cute. And the heat sink is very impressive."

"I sense a but here..." Dani replied. This was where he'd let her down, gently, since he seemed like one of those rare "nice guys." Had she been too obvious? She knew men liked to think they were the ones making the advances, though you couldn't appear too disinterested either. Their fragile egos couldn't take it.

"I already gave one!" He smiled. "I said "but" before "seriously", that is."

"Err, okay." Dani replied. It wasn't all that funny. Still, it didn't exactly sound like a rejection.

"Yeah, that wasn't one of my better jokes." He sighed. "For a but that isn't totally awkward, how's this? "This freezer of yours is very impressive, *but* I believe I promised you dinner.""

She let out the breath she was holding, glad she hadn't screwed everything up.

After a moment's thought, Dani nodded in response to his sorta-unasked question. In truth, she'd been counting on the night not lasting that long. She figured her feminine wiles would be enough, especially since her target hadn't gotten laid in two months. Come to think of it, she hadn't gotten laid since before arriving on Earth. She was half surprised she wasn't forcing him against the freezer and fondling him right there.

"So... Shall we go to the commissary?" He asked, extending his hand.

"No, actually, I've got a better idea. See, there's this little restaurant I know about here in Krin that has the best bagels imaginable. Plus it's run by a friend I haven't seen in awhile, so it'll be great." Dani replied. "And after that, I'll insist you escort me home."

And then I'll "insist" you spend the night. Georgio, you're getting lucky tonight whether you want to or not.

"You know people here?" He asked, looking puzzled. Dani thought it was a rather cute expression.

"Yeah. I grew up here, actually." Dani replied, sheepish. "Not that it makes me a bad person or anything."

He blinked. She knew she'd screwed it up.

"Why would it make you a bad person?" He asked. "Just because this place is a hellhole doesn't mean something's wrong with you. I was just surprised you knew people outside the motherload sectors."

"Oh." She replied. "Well this is awkward. I'm kinda used to people looking down on me when they hear I'm from Port Krin. They figure I'm just another piece of periphery trash good for nothing but the things I can do on my back."

Georgio smiled and placed his hand over hers. "I'd say our little detour quashed that notion. Frankly, if you were just a nice pair of legs, I wouldn't have bothered to ask you to dinner in the first place."

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It was late at night and Brox was playing with the simulators. This wasn't particularly odd, even for him with all his quirks. He liked to stay well-practiced, and he certainly enjoyed doing battle against such diverse foes – he was sure none of his sib could even imagine how different it was fighting the unending swarms, of fighting hideous chittering insects the size of small ground cars, glut with numbers greater than the whole foreign legion had bullets. Mech duels were positively dull in comparison.

Besides, whatever higher power ruled the universe already decided to play a joke on everyone and bring 21st century Terra a thousand years into its future. Who's to say that it wouldn't decide to spice things up and drop in the Elemental-like warriors of the four Tribes, The Heavy Gears, or the Tyranids of Warhammer? Dandel certainly encouraged such preparations, as unlikely as they were. The odd simulations kept the legion flexible, kept them from getting mired in patterns of thinking.

So Brox practiced. Fortunately, the simulations were more like a game to him. "Aren't you ever worried about dying, Brox?" Lady Natalie had asked once. His answer was a simple mechanical rasp and a deep metallic "Why should I, as long as I have fun?"

He'd since tuned his voice modulator to a deeper and lower pitch, just for the amusement that came from scaring people with it. Well, with it and with his large and heavily muscled form. It wouldn't be nearly as fun if he couldn't back up the intimidating voice with an intimidating body after all!

Brox had always wondered if perhaps when they were making him, they put a little too much elemental genetic code into the iron womb. He was certainly bigger than most of his fellow sib.

It was a testament to Brox's skill with mecraft that he could hold such seemingly-distracting thoughts even as he piloted his simulated mech through a fierce battle. Unfortunately, his AI teammates were proving quite useless, leaving him to battle the chittering horde almost alone.

Brox rather wished his AI underlings were more like those in Mechwarrior 3; they at least could engage a target without being told, and manage their mechs' heat without exploding, as the one in his twelve o'clock position just did. Of course, he suspected that particular "feature" was intentional, all part of Major Dansel's attempts to keep the legion on their collective toes.

Then again, it wouldn't really help him even if his teammates weren't bugged. What can four mechs do against a tide of chitin more akin to a sea of alien meat than any body of water? A laser beam leapt out from his mech's medium laser, burning away a Carnifex's head, only to watch as its fallen body was trampled over by its fellows.

Followed shortly by one of those fellows leaping up and onto his mech's cockpit. The last thing he saw before the large red "Critical Mission Failure" block letters was a hideous rendition of a Tyranid's claws tearing through the cockpit.

"Damnit." Brox said, fumbling for another simulation disk. "Let's try something closer to home. Ah... The invasion of Blakist Terra. That will be fun."

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May 1st, 2007/3022,
Washington DC, Earth.

Amy Anise Greene was a very happy twelve year old. And, like all very happy twelve year olds, she was bounding around the house like a hamster on coffee.

She had two good reasons for her happiness. First, her daddy was coming home. He'd been out there for the past two years. Out there. Out in the Inner Sphere. Having adventures, piloting a mech! A real live mech!

She'd always loved giant robots of every sort. They had to be actual robots though! Not like those yucky engles, those were cheating! And titans were too big! Walking castles don't count as giant robots! They count as super giant robots and Amy didn't like those!

No, real mechs were just the right size. Big enough to be cool, but not big enough to be silly! And they were real!

Whereas most girls her age preferred to play with Barbie and Ken, she'd much rather be playing with Sergeant Slaughter and his Warhammer. It was sooo great that they'd released new mech toys after the invasion. And new sourcebooks too!

Amy bounced over to her shiny new "Federated Suns" sourcebook. The re-release version that included updated facts and stats and fluff to better reflect reality. And it was so shiny too! With glossy full color pages! Grandma had given it to her just this morning as she woke up.

For the other reason behind Amy's happiness was that it was her birthday today. And birthdays always meant presents! Presents! PRESENTS!

Amy distantly wondered what Daddy got her. She'd wanted a battlemaster, a real one, just like Daddy piloted, but she didn't think she'd get it. Other girls asked for ponies and never got them, so why should she get a battlemech?

Still, it'd be fun to see what Daddy got her!

She flipped open the book and started reading to pass the time, noting the changes between this version and the dog-eared one she'd had before. For starters, the populations were higher. Lots higher. And – her observations were interrupted by an ill-timed ring of the doorbell.

"Daddy!" She said, leaping up and running to the door.

"Daddy!" She squealed as she opened the door and leaped into the arms of the person beyond it.

"Hey there, Angel. How have you been?" Her daddy said, wrapping his arms around her. It was very warm, and it made her feel very comfortable.

"Fine," Amy replied, not really eager to leave that warm embrace. Daddy seemed thinner than before, and his muscles were harder too. Much more importantly, he was warm.

Not that she was cold, but she liked feeling warm.

"Okay, Angel. If you'll just let go for a moment, I'll get your present."

Presents? Presents! Who cares about warmth!

Amy happily leaped out of her daddy's arms and watched as he fumbled around for something in his suitcase, which he'd brought into the house as soon as she let go.

"Ah!" He said, pulling out a box wrapped in silver foil. She gave it an experimental shake to see what it was, but she couldn't tell. It was pretty heavy though! Then she gave into the temptation and opened it up.

"Oooh!" She squealed. "A Battlemaster action figure!"

"And not just any action figure." Her daddy said. "This one is direct from the Inner Sphere. I promise you'll be the first kid in school to have one."

"It's heavy. What's it made of?" Amy asked.

"Die cast metal and recycled mech armor. Like everything else from the Inner Sphere, it'll last. Don't lose the pilot though. See," Daddy said, prying open the tiny mech's head to reveal a tiny quarter-inch

figure in the mech's cockpit. "That's Hanse Davion. It's a special limited edition that they released."

Amy's eyes went wide for a moment before returning to their usual size. "But where's Melissa? You can't have the Fox without his Lioness!"

"Err..." Her daddy started to reply. "Well, that hasn't happened yet, so nobody's making figures of it. Yet."

"Why not?" Amy asked back. "It's so romantic!"

"Thank God that Natalie isn't here to see me speechless," She heard her daddy mutter under his breath.

"Who's Natalie?" Amy asked.

"She's a friend," he replied hastily. "You'll meet her tomorrow."

"What's tomorrow though?" Amy blinked.

"I figured I'd give you a guided tour of the mech bay... I even twisted Nat's arm into letting you ride in her mech while she gets used to it again before the parade. And man oh man did she exact a high price for *that* favor!"

"You're the bestest daddy ever!" Amy said, leaping forward and giving him a hug.

Preston Daniels' Bad Trip

Port Krin, Antallos

March 17, 2007/3022

Mid-Morning

Sunlight radiated off the dry road surface. The crowd moved along at a snails pace, parting from time to time when a car or truck pushed through the middle of the street. The air was thick with the smell of sweat and strange food. Preston Daniels pushed his way through the crowd, enjoying his day off as best he could. He had heard there was a place south of town where people bet on how long a guy could get hit with a stick before losing consciousness. That was at least something different.

Preston Daniels was not happy. He couldn't quite remember what prompted him to ask his uncle to find him a job with the CSN. It must have seemed like a good idea at the time, but now, he couldn't decide if he was more bored or depressed. He had watched his DVDs a dozen times now. He'd had his fill of Curb. And the local Holoprogramming? Unwatchable. The future was here, and it was entertained by bad 80s TV.

His job was not working out well at all. Administration was a word that could mean many things. In his case, it was double checking paperwork filled out by aggrieved Port Krin 'small business owners'. Thugs and pimps, more accurately. They treated the CSN legal system as entertainment more than anything. He had yet to hear of any actual financial judgments, they couldn't be expecting any profit.

Moving past an alleyway, a voice called out to him. "Hey Molo. Molo. Come here." Preston rolled his eyes and started to move on, but something caught his eye. He hated the term Molo, short for Motherloader. It was one of the less amusing nicknames the locals had for the CSN forces. He had expected a homeless guy, or grade Q hooker, but it was 3 Asian-looking men sitting in folding chairs calling out to him. The guy on the right was tall, while the guy on the far left looked half asleep.

"What's up? No hookers please." He was already trying to call up his training on the best way to turn down a hooker. He had his CSN "Dealing with Locals" infocard in his wallet, but didn't want to pull that out this close to the crowd. The middle guy coughed and held up a plate with some kind of food on it.

"No hookers, man, no hookers. We're cooks. Testing out some new recipes. Molos got a lot of cash man, we want to make something to draw in the GDI." The middle guy had a pleading tone, Preston could make it out even over his weird space-english accent. "Want to try it out, the last guy said it tasted like something called 'hot wings'."

Preston was intrigued. This was new, which to him qualified as near miraculous. He wandered deeper into the alley, and took the multicolored little bead off the plate. "This is safe, right? Not poison?"

The guys looked at each other in confusion. "No, no, it's just food. Safe." The guy on the left ate a little one from the edge, while the one on the right shot him a disapproving look.

Popping the bead into his mouth, Preston tasted something like a sweet hot sauce. It was good, and the bead dissolved after just a few seconds. "This is really good! What do you guys make it out of? If it's bugs or something, don't tell me that, I don't want to know."

The middle guy laughed. "My name is Ichiro. Come on back, we'll show you the kitchen."

Ichiro got up, and moved back into the alley, down towards a local delivery truck. Preston thought it looked like most of the Inner Sphere civilian vehicles he had seen, it looked 3 times too big, and appeared to be heavily armored. He hated this planet.

"Is it in the van?" Preston peered in. The inside of the van appeared to be empty besides some boxes. "Oh, I can't take a ride with you guys." Turning around, he started to shrug, and the half asleep guy shot him with a dart gun. "Wow. Those are real huh." Suddenly the lip of the van's floor shot up and hit him in the side of the face. No wait. He was face down in the back of the van, the rear half of his body dangling out the back. The three men picked him and tossed

him in the back, and shut the doors.

Port Krin, Antallos
March 17, 2007/3022
Late Afternoon

The van pulled up to the customs pullthrough at the Port Krin spaceport. A GDI soldier waved them into a slot, and motioned for the driver to get out. Ichiro got out of the van, and the taller man followed him. They both waved at the soldier. "Carl, hey man, how are you?"

Carl Johnson rolled his eyes. He didn't like these guys, and they didn't like him. "Fine. Pop the doors, guys." The two men smiled and walked back to the van's rear doors. Opening them from the inside, the tired looking man stepped outside, leaving the inside of the van empty except for some boxes. Stepping inside, Carl sighed. "Open your compartment."

Ichiro and his two companions had been this way many times before. They always had a few crates of condoms, picked up from the WHO in the green zone. The WHO was just giving them away. The first few times, Carl opened them up, and poked around, but lately he just gave them a glance over, passing a sensor wand over them. Of course, a few weeks back they had substituted an emission shielded crate for a regular one. He hadn't noticed so far, and no reason he'd notice today. Still, they held their breath.

Carl knew they had a smuggler's compartment. It was usually filled with some kind of local drug or homemade folk art bought off of a GDI soldier. They paid him off with a wad of D, K, or C bills, and he looked the other way. The art must fetch a high price in the Inner Sphere, being unique. The other boxes over the compartment were the legitimate cargo, always filled with condoms. These guys apparently made a killing selling them offworld, the idea of factory made prophylactic not having survived to the 31st century. "Today, guys."

Looking around themselves, Ichiro and his two companions saw

dozens of armed GDI soldiers working at the customs office. Steeling himself, Ichiro stepped into the van, and opened the hidden door with a magnetic unlocking key. Looking inside, Carl saw a couple of baggies of some local drug, and a cola can robot, maybe a Warhammer or something. He wondered how it got here, and what these guys were going to make out of brands like Pepsi or Mountain Dew. But not for long.

"Ok. Looks clear to me." Carl gave the other boxes a cursory glance, before looking back at Ichiro. He grinned, and waited for the payoff. Ichiro sighed and handed over the cash. "Good doing business with you fellows. See you next time."

Carl got out of the van, and filled out the customs paperwork. It read what usually read, "Boxes of Condoms, assorted. Checked and approved". He handed a pink copy of the report to Ichiro, and waved the van forward. He would file the rest of the paperwork later.

Inside the van, Ichiro started breathing easier. He wondered if the guard would have searched more thoroughly if he knew they would be taking off later today, but put it out of his mind. The CSN would file a missing persons report when this guy didn't show back up in the green zone by sundown. The CSN were downright terrifying in spycraft, and Ichiro hadn't wanted to take the risk of faking a body. They had to lift off and be gone by sundown.

They had followed this molo clown around for a month or more. He had the right mixture of unimportance and regular activity. He always stayed out, almost missing curfew, and went far out into the city seeking some entertainment. They had him pegged, and it was cakewalk setting up a trap in that alley. He was literally the most credulous, least careful person he had ever seen. It terrified him thinking the guy might be a honeypot or something, but at least in that shielded box he couldn't be emitting any signals.

He drove the van far down the spaceport surface, hoping that the loading process was done, and they could get done with this. He hoped this guy was worth it. He was planning on creating a career from this operation, a real legend. Of course, it was only legendary if anyone back home would believe him about how good these

periphery barbs truly were.

The dropship door was open, and appeared as if they were ready for him. He drove the van up the ramp. His two companions laughed softly from the back of the van. They had begun to break open the crate holding their captive. He was hogtied and gagged, and he really hoped the guy hadn't suffocated. That happened sometimes, for no good reason. The guy had peed himself though. That usually happened.

Inside the ship, a large nordic-looking guy was pacing back and forth. As soon as the van stopped, he shouted "Are we clear?". Ichiro nodded, and the guy took off towards an elevator bank. Techs waited for a sign, and Ichiro waited for the guys in the back to finish. He got an all clear wave, and got out of the van, moving back to open the van cargo doors. His two friends got out, holding their guest between them.

"Go. If the captain needs us, we'll be in our quarters." The techs rolled their eyes, and swarmed the van, tying it down, and pulling out the cargo, legit and contraband. The large dropship doors were pulling closed, and the whole vessel was entering transit condition. With luck, they'd get clearance and be well on their way to a jump point by planet sundown.

Port Krin
Antallos
CSN
31st October 3022/2007

Dear Carmela,

It was with relief and joy that I received your letter. We knew you would be out of contact for an extended period of time, but with Antallos' reputation and especially with the recent conflicts on the planet, the family has feared the worst for the past year. I had faith in you, your abilities and training, however. I had to remind your parents that it'll take more than some backwater pirate scum to kill a Mcfarland. Their worries have eased since your letter, yet they would like nothing more than to see you return. No doubt they've expressed this in their holovid message as well.

I also would like nothing more than to see you again, but I'm afraid that our duty to the Magistracy must come first. You are in a unique position there and as you have communicated your willingness to serve in whatever role the Magistracy requires, it would be foolish to ask you to come home.

Before we get into that, I appreciate your thorough report on the situation there, and on the emergent CSN. This new Periphery power is of great interest to MIM and the Magistracy. As your report stated, the potential for trade, despite the relative distances between our nations, is an attractive proposition. We therefore need to establish diplomatic relations with the CSN.

But we do need to overcome the problem of distance nevertheless and assembling a proper mission is

currently not possible with all our diplomatic assets tied up elsewhere. Therefore we must sidestep this problem. Sending a new and inexperienced Ambassador is clearly out of the question, therefore we are trying to coax our retiring Fed Suns Ambassador to remain in the diplomatic core and join you in establishing a Magistracy Embassy to the CSN. Even if the Magestrix succeeds in convincing her cousin, it will take some time for her replacement to arrive and only then can she make the four month journey from New Avalon.

Therefore the Magestrix has ordered that you be appointed as Temporary Ambassador to the CSN. You will find your credentials and access to a new Ambassadorial expense account attached to this letter. Congratulations, Carmela. I realize you are not a wordsmith but it is what the Magistracy requires at this time. I know and trust you, and that you will represent our nation to the best of your ability and further its interests.

With respect to beginning a mutual exchange of medical skill and knowledge with the CSN, the closest Magistracy Doctor who can readily join you is currently on Kinkaid II in the Outworld Alliance. He has recently indicated his wish to move on to a new assignment. I've attached his dossier to this letter that will tell you all you'll need to know. Orders have already been sent to him to settle his affairs and catch the first available transport to Antallos.

The Magestrix has also sent an official communication to Ambassador Smith of the CSN, along with your current address in Port Krin.

As time goes by, I'll keep an eye out for more personnel that can be sent your way.

Yours Sincerely,

Estelle Mcfarland

425

[Click to expand...](#)

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Carmela lowered the letter from her Aunt and gazed out of her apartment window that from the fifteenth floor had a nice view overlooking the city and then the expansive lake reflecting the harsh sun.

Temporary Ambassador?

It seemed that it might be a lot more than 'temporary' if Elizabeth Centrella, Cousin to Magestrix Kyalla Centrella, couldn't be convinced to remain in the diplomatic service. The woman was in her late fifties after all, and had twenty five years of ambassadorship to the Fedsuns under her belt. She would've been looking forward to a three month journey through space back to Canopus and retirement from active government service to spend with her family. Carmela was tempted to write a letter back to her Aunt telling her not to bother getting a replacement so soon and that she would be glad to accept her new role as a diplomat.

But that would not go over well. That she was being accorded this honor at all by order of the Magestrix was enough. It would be another prick in the egos of the Froness, at least. She wished she could see the look on those noble snobs faces when this circulated around the court. The Mcfarland family had long been part of the Girin – the newest class of nobility in the Magistracy. They were those who had, in the past or present, performed exceptional services to the state in both civil and military spheres. It had all started with her grandfather, who had as a Command Sergeant in the First Canopian Brigade, became a double Ace as a Mechwarrior fighting off a Taurian incursion. With the family's entry into the Girin Nobility, Carmela's father became a diplomat, who would eventually be chosen as a mate by her mother, who was herself in the Durachi or Merchant Nobility.

Carmela gazed at the letter again and seated herself on the couch in the small living room of her apartment, picking up a very nice mechanical pencil from the low coffee table. She then opened up a manila envelope and pulled out the special one-time encryption pad that had been issued specifically for her. Referencing the number '425', she began to decode the hidden message within the letter itself. It was slow work, but ten minutes later she was done.

From Director MIM,
Negotiate for purchase any CSN military technology
made available. Good opportunity to enhance the
MAF. Reinstated, promoted to Commander for
actions in BOH. More to follow. Congrats.

[Click to expand...](#)

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She sighed. "No rest for me it seems." She turned her attention to the dossier of the physician that was being sent her way. "Doctor Edwin Gale Richard," she read. "Forty-two years old, born on Luxen graduated 4th in his class from Canopus Medical Academy, eight years practicing medicine on Lindenmarie and Fanadir, then assigned to the Fedsuns on New Avalon before moving on to the Outworlds Alliance." He seemed to be quite competent and experienced on paper, and this would be something to bring to the CSN.

She wondered how long it would take Ambassador Smith to get in contact with her. Even so it would probably be a good idea to get the old uniform out and see if there was somewhere she could get her Ensign's diamonds altered to reflect her increase in rank.

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Port Krin

Antallos

CSN

7th November 3022/2007

Captain Bradley Talley nervously patted down his GDI dress uniform as he stood in front the ordinary-looking door to room 1512 and prepared himself mentally to not react in any way to what he would see potentially see beyond. He was a veteran GDI tank commander, after all, had seen action in the Battle of Port Krin, and most recently at Kronkite, where his own MBT had accounted for scrapping 3 enemy Mechs, before his tank had taken an AC round to the glaxis plate. Thankfully it had done its job very nicely and kept his crew alive, allowing them to retreat from the battle whilst sending a main gun round directly at the cockpit of the scum who had done it. It hadn't killed the bastard, but it had weakened the armor around that section, allowing a GDI mech to finish him off.

So if he had done all that, why was his stomach feeling as if it was suddenly his first day at basic? Now that his tank was under repair, he had been assigned the relatively light temporary duty to escort the new Canopian Ambassador to the GDI Compound for a meeting with Ambassador Smith. The reason for the butterflies doing cartwheels inside him was the account of what had happened to the Lieutenant who had been sent to personally deliver the formal invitation to arrange this very meeting.

It had all begun when the new Canopian Ambassador had answered the door. The mid morning arrival of the Lieutenant had obviously been somewhat unexpected, and when the apartment door had opened...

Oh, how Talley wished he could've been there. He was probably correct that every red-blooded male who'd heard the scuttlebutt shared that wish. The Lieutenant in question was reticent to give too much detail, but suffice it say, that the Ambassador was 'stacked' and the young man had a dazed dreamy look in his eyes whenever he told the story.

He took a deep breath and knocked three times. Then he kicked himself, the Ambassador was deaf, so she wouldn't be able to hear it. He pulled out his pen and a small piece of paper he had brought along to slip under the door. He was halfway through writing the note, when to his surprise, the door opened.

"Good afternoon, Captain."

It took him a moment to respond. "Ambassador McFarland. I'm Captain Bradley Talley. I'm here to escort you to Ambassador Smith."

He came to attention and saluted. Talley didn't know whether to be disappointed or impressed. She was wearing a dress uniform that consisted of tight-fitting dark blue tunic and trousers, with a contrasting light blue collar and cuffs. Gold piping adorned the trouser legs and cuffs, whilst an insignia pin of three running horses against the backdrop of a starfield was fixed on her chest, and two gold edged hollow diamonds were attached to her collar. It was a uniform that flattered the female figure, and was specifically designed for it.

She briskly returned the salute and gestured behind her, where there were two rather large cases of baggage. He had been briefed as much as possible on Canopian society, so he wasn't surprised at the rather imperious attitude she was giving him. But in any case, even on Earth, you helped a lady carry her luggage. It was a bit of a struggle to manage both considering their weight, and he thanked God that the building had a working elevator. He immediately handed the luggage off to one of the two PFCs waiting by the armored Hummer. This allowed him to open the rear door for the Ambassador who sent him a smile in thanks.

"Let's go, Sergeant." He said immediately to the driver, after he had gotten in the rear right seat. The Hummer was in gear and sped off abruptly.

Talley wished he and the Ambassador were surrounded by the protective armor of a MBT, but that was far too conspicuous. And while he doubted that the insurgents had any specific intel on McFarland, they had to assume that they did and plan for the worst, which was why two more armored Hummers joined them once they had turned a corner; both were heavily armed as well, with roof mounted M307 Autogrenade launchers that were remotely operated by a gunner sitting in the forward passenger seat.

Mcfarland's voice modulated oddly, so he couldn't tell if she was nervous or not. Her body language didn't show nervousness either. "Are we expecting trouble?"

"No, Ambassador. Just being cautious."

"Hmmm, the enemy city state remnants. Their insurgent tactics are effective yet terribly frustrating."

"That they are," admitted Talley, he knew better than to talk about his thoughts frankly to a foreign dignitary. Personally, he felt there weren't enough invectives in the English language to describe how he felt. In his mind, before the ISOT event, he had imagined that space would've been a place where shit like this was left behind on Earth. He had been quickly disabused of that after the Pirate Invasions. But now the bombings targeting GDI patrols and the attacks on infrastructure had left a permanent bad taste in the mouths of every Earther working to better the lives of the people in the Port, and Talley wanted to scream in frustration.

It took some twenty thankfully uneventful minutes for the motorcade to arrive at the main gates of the GDI Compound. Every man in the Hummer was on the alert kept their eyes scanning from right to left. He was pleased to see the MPs looking on-the-ball as well. They were let through the rising bollards, spike strips and blast deflectors after the MP had visually checked his ID card and swiped it through a portable scanner for verification.

"Thank you, Sir." The MP saluted and the motorcade proceeded on towards the large administration building that had once served as Vorax's headquarters. Ambassador Smith stood waiting at the base of the expansive stairs leading up to GDI Headquarters. The traditional red carpet was laid out on it, and an honor guard of GDI Infantry in their dress uniform was perfectly arranged on the other side of the driveway. The brass band started to play the Canopian anthem the instant Mcfarland emerged from the Hummer, after Smith himself opened the door for her.

Mcfarland couldn't hear it of course, so Talley really didn't know why the band had bothered. Ambassador Smith seemingly didn't brook

diplomatic protocol for anything when it could be really helped. She did look somewhat sadly at the GDI brass band as she passed them and Smith did tell her what they were playing. Her look of surprise was brief and quickly replaced with appreciation.

The instant both Ambassadors were out of sight and in the building the Sergeants in charge of the honor guard and brass band began barking out orders and in perfect formation they marched away back to the barracks. Talley watched them go and leaned against the Hummer, wishing the damn thing had an air-conditioner so he could at least keep somewhat cool whilst they waited for Mcfarland to return.

Sergeant Banks opened the armored door of the Hummer to let some cool air in, and stared up at Talley from the drivers' seat. "So ya think it actually happened, Sir?"

The Captain didn't have to guess what the man meant. "It depends on what version you've heard, Sergeant. Lieutenant Weiss is barely twenty three, and not exactly a grizzled gunny. There's bound to be some exaggeration in his story to start with, then when it was retold over and over..." Talley sighed. "Her answering the door in the buff; that I can believe. That she promptly pulled him in after reading the letter to have her wicked way with him...bull. That's a stereotype of Canopians, I'm sure. They're not the kingdom of the nymphomaniacs, Sergeant."

"How d'ya figure that, Captain?"

Talley sighed. "If they were, then the entire Inner Sphere would be busting their door down."

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Conference Room

GDI Headquarters

Antallos

CSN

7th November 3022/2007

Carmela sat down on a very impressive high backed leather chair that seemed to mold itself to her back; the feeling of comfort was so great that she closed her eyes for a brief moment and just basked in it. She opened her eyes and regarded a room that seemed like it could've come from the heyday of the Star League; it was the other side of the coin of that awful conference room in Hermantown. The floors were soft pristine carpet, comfortable lighting and a wooden table that she could see her own reflection in. Directly across from her sat Ambassador Smith with a large file folder open in front of him, and he seemed rather bemused at her enjoyment of the chair.

"If this is what you sit on within your office, Ambassador Smith, it's a wonder that you get any work done."

Smith's mouth twitched. "Yes, well, I must admit my chair isn't quite as good as these. This is the VIP Conference room. Speaking of which, can I offer you some coffee before we begin?" He gestured to a silver plated tray with delicate looking cups and a carafe on it. She nodded eagerly. Motherlode coffee was a boon in Port Krin, and the stuff sold out so fast that there were long queues outside the supply stores when a Dropship from Motherlode had landed the day before. She had managed to buy a tin of a brand called 'Jacobs', and had savored every cup that came from it.

The smell of the hot coffee that wafted from the now open carafe was already delectable. When she had her cup and added sugar, declined the milk and just took a sip...

"Oh goodness," she moaned. "You spoil me, Ambassador. What type of coffee is this?"

"We call it Jamaican Blue Mountain; it's the most expensive and sought after in the CSN. "

Carmela sighed after taking another sip. "I can taste why." She had to force her thoughts to get down to business. "I want to take this opportunity to congratulate your government on its recent success in capturing all four hostile city states."

"Thank you," nodded Smith.

"And speaking on behalf of a government that despises slavery and guarantees personal freedoms for the individual, it is good to see another nation in the Periphery that espouses such beliefs and actively promotes them."

"The CSN is committed to seeing democracy and liberty spread, though we appreciate the difficulty in maintaining such a system in a star nation spanning hundreds of light years and with the limitations on interstellar communication that exist today."

Carmela carefully sorted through that statement in her head and took another sip from her cup. "My government wishes to pursue a relationship with yours that would see an exchange of knowledge take place and in time even full trade relations."

"What form of knowledge?" Smith asked politely. Carmela could see he knew full well already, but they were just going through the motions of politics.

"Sometime in December, a Magistracy physician will arrive on Antallos, he will take up residence in the new Embassy but will open a clinic in Port Krin, and perhaps even seek to do work in the hospital you are in the final stages of building. Our physicians have practical medical experience and knowledge that dates back to the Star League. Most of them travel with small libraries of books and holodisks with that medical knowledge. A lot of it, though, assumes the availability of medical technology that no longer exists in the Inner Sphere, and that which still exists, is only on Canopus IV. The ability to produce more such machines has also been lost, except where we managed to save the production lines, but we have lost the technical skill to run these factories.

"What the Magistracy is proposing is that in exchange for this medical knowledge, that the CSN sends technicians to Canopus to aid in rebuilding or in some cases restarting these production lines. There are also Mech and ASF factories on Canopus IV and Duncanshire that would benefit from a refit, repair or merely more knowledgeable hands working with them. It would do wonders for Canopian security to be able to field more national military assets per year, and rely less

on greedy mercenaries to hold the line against pirates and slavers."

"We certainly appreciate that need," Smith mused. "And I personally understand what a massive godsend this medical knowledge would be to the CSN. We have historical records of what your ancestors were capable of...genetic science to the point where they actually engineered a healthy viable mermaid for instance! Implants that could achieve all a manner of things, artificial organs that work efficiently with near no complications. It boggles the mind. "

"The mermaid is an extreme example and was only done once," Carmela explained. "We don't know what happened to her. Lots of Canopian children are told bedtime stories where someone heroic spirited her away in a tank and released her into an ocean of Eluesis before House Marik took that world from us. It's more likely she was simply killed in the attack on the planet."

Smith nodded sadly. "To get back to my point, the CSN is concerned that if we enable you to increase your military production that it would be provocative to your immediate neighbors."

Carmela had to fight against the urge to snap back in a most undiplomatic fashion. If there was one thing that her father had advised in his letters was to never, ever, ever get angry in a diplomatic meeting. If you were angry and the meeting was going in a direction contrary to your principles, politely say goodbye and simply walk out.

"Let the Magistracy worry about that."

Smith tilted his head in a motion that said, 'Understood' and she also saw approval in his eyes. "Very well, but we are also concerned for the safety of our technicians."

"They would be accorded the utmost consideration and protection the Magistracy can provide. We could even see about hiring a protection force to accompany them on the journey there."

Smith shook his head. "That would draw too much attention. Secrecy must be maintained I'm afraid."

"You think that word could leak out and someone may try to snatch them?"

Smith said nothing, but Carmela saw in his face an answer that he was clearly showing. 'Yes'

"Which House?" she asked with narrowed eyes.

"Why do you assume we're worried about a Successor State?"

"Surely any of them would love to get their hands on one of your technicians and wring out your technological secrets?"

"Oh I'm sure they have such plans," Smith declared grimly. "But we keep a close eye on our people here on Antallos. If they tried it, we would be alerted in short order, and there are plans in place to deal with such an eventuality."

"So assuming we can ensure secrecy..."

"That would only protect them on the journey, it's once they're on Canopus IV and Duncanshire, that I'm afraid we have a problem."

Carmela blinked at what he was implying. "You believe someone is going to try and stop them from completing their task." Smith's silence was answer enough. "What do you base this belief on?"

"There are a number of reasons, madam Ambassador. One is that we're concerned that your neighbors have eyes and ears on or even, in those factories. And that they might take exception to our engineers repairing them, enough to take very regrettable actions. That is why we are hesitant to send our engineers to work openly."

"I see," Carmela sighed. She wouldn't put it past the Maskirovka or SAFE to have such sleeper agents. "The CSN engineers would have to work in secret when the factories are closed every night, we'd have to train them to act as Canopians and then infiltrate them into Canopus IV. Oh, and it would make things a lot easier if they could mostly be female. In the meantime, if there are sleepers in our factories, MIM

will sniff them out."

"I hope they are up to it."

"MIM has a long operational history; it has been our eyes and dagger in the shadows since before the Reunification War. We fought the SLDF, we fought House Marik, Liao, and the Taurians, and our nation is still standing."

Smith raised his hands disarmingly. "Just checking. Now let us get to more mundane things. There are a number of buildings within the outer GDI compound that is available for selection as the Canopian Embassy." He pulled out a map and showed a green highlighted street filled with wide variety of buildings, some had red lines drawn through them, showing they were unsafe or under repair. She saw one multistory building colored in red with a stylized green dragon over it, on the opposite end of the street was another building covered in yellow with the symbol of a blazing sun and sword. "Typical of them," she muttered.

She then saw a nice looking three floor building, almost a very large house. It wasn't too big and not too small, its outer styling and façade needed some definite improvement and its interior would definitely need a lot of work to make it into something worthy of Canopus.

"Oh, before I forget, I have a personal request."

Smith considered that. "If it is within reason and in my power to grant, I shall."

"In my inquiries to my initial GDI liaison, I asked how your society deals with the deaf, and if there was perhaps any remedies you have for my specific condition. She mentioned that you have something called a Cochlear Implant."

Smith smiled warmly. "Consider it done. I will have a GDI Doctor visit you for a preliminary examination tomorrow in your temporary quarters on the Compound."

Carmela returned the smile, trying mightily to stop her eyes from

tearing up. "Thank you."

Smith stood and shook hands with her. "You're welcome, Ambassador."

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**Multi-purpose Hall, GDI Compound
Port Krin
Antallos
CSN
10th November 3022/2007**

"So do you think it will be accepted?"

"There's no question about it, Ambassador Smith. The benefits to both our people are clear, but as the extreme delay in my arrival as Ambassador to you indicates," Matoskah replied with a rueful grin on his swarthy features, "the Alliance is not a body that reacts swiftly on a diplomatic level. Expect also to be inundated with last minute amendments." The Ambassador of the Outworlds Alliance to the CSN took a bite out of his small plate filled with snacks, and washed it down with water from a champagne glass. Smith took a sip from his own champagne as he considered that statement while looking at the mingling diplomatic staffers from both their respective governments. The Fedsun contingent was keeping somewhat to themselves, while the Combine representatives were rather conspicuous in their absence.

Smith hadn't really expected to be able to get them to stay for long in the same room with the Federated Suns, he had allowed himself some hope...in retrospect it had been a fool's hope. The party was a rather impromptu affair; officially it was to welcome the Canopus Ambassador to Antallos. In actuality it was just a bit of revelry and celebration in the wake of the defeat of the four hostile city states. It also handily doubled as relaxation before the hard work of bringing the people of those cities to the table of representation began.

"We'll be sure to plan for any contingency that falls within the realm

of imagination."

"It's usually that which is outside our imagination that ends up causing the most problems," Matoskah stated sagely. "Speaking of which, is the Canopian Ambassador going to merely remain a figment of our imagination?"

Smith didn't bother to scan the hall for Mcfarland. "We have an expression on our world, 'fashionably late'. I wonder if she's heard of it or perhaps it's a trait of Canopian matriarchal nobility."

Matoskah was puzzled. "Being late is a fashion?"

"It's to tell people that you are so busy with other engagements that you can only arrive late, or its simply a way to make an 'entrance'. I suspect it's both in her case."

Matoskah shook his head. "I don't envy her, being responsible for organizing the building up of an Embassy all by herself."

The herald that had been stationed outside the main doors to the hall entered at that moment. The man was a GDI Senior Warrant Officer resplendent in his party dress uniform. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Ambassador of the Magistracy of Canopus, Lady of the Girin, Carmela Mcfarland." He stood aside and allowed the guest of honor to walk in.

Smith felt his mouth promptly dry on the spot and all thought vanish like mist before the sun, as his mind was too busy contemplating the vision that had walked into the hall. He had thought that her formal military uniform had wonderfully complimented her figure; the ensemble she was wearing now made that seem like a grain sack.

The dress seemed like it was painted onto her, it was made of a silvery glittery material, which actually seemed somewhat transparent, except for key areas. It started with a knot at the back of her neck, then two strips of material snaked down over her breasts, leaving the valley between and slightly more exposed. It continued down to meet just beyond her navel, where it blossomed to surround her and into a standard skirt, but with a slit on the side that exposed her hip and a very long and toned left leg with every second step.

Her exposed skin was nicely tanned with no pale areas whatsoever, there was the occasional freckle though, allowing Smith see her as a living woman and not a work of art.

He shook himself out of his funk and as a host and gentleman should, walked forward to escort her into the party proper.

He grinned mildly. "It's a distinct pleasure to see you again, madam Ambassador."

"And you, Ambassador Smith," she nodded, surveying the hall. It was rather impressively decorated with traditional Canopian colors and buntings.

"Allow me to introduce to you the Ambassador of the Outworlds Alliance, Matoskah."

The man in question bowed his head to her. "It's wonderful to make your acquaintance, madam Ambassador."

"Thank you," she frowned slightly in thought. "Your name...is it perhaps ancient Native North American?"

Matoskah's dark eyebrows raised in surprise, "Yes indeed, Ambassador Mcfarland. My ancestors left Terra as a whole tribe during the days of the Terran Alliance. The Hopi tribe had to uproot itself twice since then, first to escape Mckenna's reunification campaigns and then to what is now the Outworlds Alliance after the First Succession War. The Hopi are now contently settled on Rushaven."

"Fascinating," she smiled. "Do your people live traditionally as it were?"

"Most of us, yes. My grandfather, however, felt his spirit guide calling him to the city and to make a very long story short, I was eventually elected as Rushaven's parliamentary representative. I had finished my final term, but President Avellar presented me with the Ambassadorship to the CSN. My own spirit guide advised me to accept."

Smith coughed as his champagne went down the wrong pipe. "Matoskah, you wouldn't happen to know if there are any other tribes still on Terra or out there in the Sphere?"

The Alliance Ambassador frowned. "Why do you wish to know?"

"Ah, just curiosity," Smith shrugged. "We have a few Native American tribes on Motherlode."

Matoskah nearly spit out his water all over Ambassador Mcfarland at hearing that. He managed to stop himself, "Are you serious?"

"Certainly," Smith replied in a nonplussed fashion. "I'd have to do a bit of research, but off the top of my head I know there are Apache, Navajo, Sioux and a number of others."

Carmela laughed at the expression on Matoskah's face. "I think you just broke him, Ambassador Smith."

Matoskah shook himself out of his astonishment. "I must think about this, I hope you will be amenable in the future to speak to me on this matter."

Smith smiled genially. "I will do the necessary research."

Matoskah looked thoughtful now. "To get back to your question, as far as we know, there is definitely a Seneca Tribe somewhere in the Federated Suns, as well as Abenaki, Blackfoot and Comanche. There might be others on so called 'Lost Worlds' as a result of the chaos during the Succession Wars. But..." He winced and took a deep breath, steeling himself. "There were a number of Tribes that refused to leave mother Earth. They lived and grew with the times, but when the Amaris Coup occurred...the Usurper's troops began 'cleansing' Terra of those he deemed 'not worthy'."

The normally taciturn Smith winced visibly, "My God."

"There are a number of tribes that were made completely extinct and the survivors were too small in number and they were lost to time

completely."

"If you hadn't already asked, I would insist that you come to see me about this," Smith declared with conviction. He took a deep cleansing breath but continued to look visibly troubled. "Let's talk about something more pleasant...ah, how did your visit with the Doctor go dear?"

Carmela smiled brilliantly, banishing the dour mood from both men. "Doctor Horton told me I was a good potential candidate for a cochlear implant. He advised me though that I should wait, that researchers on your world were working with neurohelmet technology to potentially solve some inherent problems with the implant."

"Interesting," Smith mused. "I suppose you could also get your own Magistracy Doctor to work on this as well. Get his input."

Matoskah reached for another snack. "What is this Cochlear Implant?"

Smith gestured elegantly to Carmela. "She'll know a lot more than me now."

"It's a surgically implanted electronic device that provides a sense of sound to a person who is 'profoundly deaf'," she explained.

Matoskah looked clearly impressed and with satisfaction said, "Ha, so much for that little preconception about the Periphery, if that is the medical technology the CSN is capable of. I must say, Ambassador Smith your people are really doing wonders in redressing some of the perceptions that the Inner Sphere holds about the Periphery."

"We are merely promoting that which is self-evident," Smith declared firmly. "Freedom, liberty, equality. We extend our hand in friendship to those who wish it, and our firm fist to those who want to take our dream away from us." Matoskah and Carmela traded sidelong looks at that.

"I can only say, on behalf of the Alliance, that we wish to be friends, Ambassador."

"Friends," Carmela echoed with a brilliant smile. "Now...since this is actually a party for me, what is there to eat?"

Looking at Pictures

Deep below Hiltonhead

Terra

12 October 3022

One would think that security would relax this deep underneath the public front Comstar presented to the galaxy. But that was not the case, ROM's all seeing eyes were particularly vigilant down here. Even her Precentor robes, had she worn them, would not have gotten her past the checkpoints without a thorough check to confirm her identity. She did not particularly like coming down here but there was a very special asset down here that she needed to consult. Precentor Patricia Copperfield walked down a silent poorly lit corridor to a door decorated with a poster of a fire whip wielding demon cloaked in shadows and the rather blasphemous text "*Not even Blake's light can save you in here*". She knocked on the door but got no response; she tried harder but still got no reaction. Sighing deeply she pulled out an override keycard.

"Blake's mercy. I do hope he is wearing pants today" she whispered to herself, the memories of her last visit still, unfortunately, quite clear.

The door opened and the smell of old food, piles of unwashed clothing and questionable personal hygiene washed over her. The skinny pale fellow sitting in the darkness was lit only by a dozen displays and holo projections and didn't notice her entering. Judging from the sound leaking from the headset he would hardly notice a full scale orbital bombardment.

"Martin... **MARTIN!!!!**" she shouted to draw his attention from the screens.

"**YOW!**" he jumped out of the chair as if poked by a cattle prod. "Don't do that! Oh... Pat, eh... I mean Precentor."

Martin had hardly joined the order out of any conviction of the righteousness of its holy mission or out of any interest in the salvation of the Inner Sphere from its current masters. Rather it was

simply that Comstar had the best toys for him to play with. Indeed the main reason for him residing down here, other than the fact that he really wasn't the social type, was simply that the mainframe for the entire complex was located on the other side of the display covered wall. You had access to more computer power in this room than anywhere else in the entire complex.

"Have you had time to look at the problem I gave you?" Patricia asked as she cleared a chair of what appeared to be yesterday's lunch.

"Eh... Yes! Sure Pat... eh Precentor. I have it right here." He sat back down and called up a holo image of a familiar but somehow different planet. "Earth, but not as we know it..." his voice seemed a bit distant. "Yes it was a very interesting problem, but I think I have solved it. Even with what little data you provided" he said slightly reproachfully.

"I gave you everything we had Martin. ROM have had problems getting intel on this subject" she protested and ignored the faint shudder running through him at the mention of ROM. Adept Martin had had issues with ROM ever since, in a distracted moment, he accidentally said Toyama was an ancient car brand. Patricia had managed to protect him from the full wrath of the Fundamental Branch and their allies in ROM but even a faint brush of ROM's displeasure was enough to leave Martin a bit twitchy whenever it was mentioned.

"Yes, well given the stuff I got this is my analysis Pa... Precentor" he handed her a small holodisk.

"Could you give me a short summary?" She asked as she pocketed the disk. "And you can call me Pat in here. I got promoted not deified!"

"Uhhh... Yeah, sure... Pat" he replied "Let's start at the beginning. This is the image of the supposed Motherlode home world that was used to trick Vorax pirate coalition into attacking and walk right into a trap."

"Yes...?"

"You don't see the obvious problems with this?" he asked.

"Well, no." she admitted.

"Why use this image? This world! The one world, apart from your own home world and perhaps the major worlds of your home nation, that any person in the Inner Sphere is most likely to recognize?"

"Well it is obviously some sort of fake..." she started.

"NO!" he interrupted "I have had the computers analyze every pixel on every image including the low level shots from the dropship. I have double checked the performance of the camera gear that our records claims are mounted on the ships that supposedly took these images and do you know how many signs of image manipulation I found?"

"Ehhh..."

"That is right! None! No repeating patterns. No missed villages or jumping ships from one planetary rotation to the next. Now what does that tell us?" he pushed on without waiting for a reply "It tells us that this is an extremely good forgery, since we know it can't actually be real. It would take even us with the most sophisticated computers in the galaxy a long time to make a forgery good enough to pass as thorough an inspection as I have put it through."

"Well so what? We all agree it was a fake, the Primus thought it quite funny and even sent a message to Vorax asking when his invaders would show up." She said with a smile.

"You are missing the point! Think Pat!" he had forgotten completely that he was lecturing his superior "This is not something you slap together from scratch in an evening!" he said with a wave towards the slowly spinning holographic planet. "The intel from Antallos is fairly firm on this point, the original raid came as a complete surprise to the Motherloders and the anger of the GDI staff towards pirates and piracy seems to be genuine. Combine that with the last known location of the jumpship Elephant and its return to Antallos." Martin brought up a two dimensional map of the periphery with two

blinking dates. "We know Motherlode is about eight jumps from Antallos. Now what does that tell you?"

"That they had little time to bait the trap" Patricia replied and looked more intently at the map "that they had to start with something?" She shifted her gaze to the innocently spinning holographic planet.

"Yes! But why use Terra and not some other world far less likely to be recognized for what it was? Indeed why not just use old imagery of Terra?"

'Why indeed' Patricia thought. The more one thought about it the crazier it seemed.

Martin waited for a moment before continuing "Because Terra was the only developed world they had detailed enough images of to make a quick forgery and they spiced it up with enough easy loot to draw a massive response. Using one of the new worlds from back when man first reached for the stars would still mean they would have had to superimpose a developed world's entire infrastructure and activity on an essentially untouched planet to make a fake tempting enough to draw in Vorax. It would be a far greater and much more time consuming effort." He paused briefly. "If anyone was asked to verify the authenticity of these images on Antallos their main effort would likely be looking for image manipulation rather than ancient historical references. It was one hell of a gamble; I would not like to play online poker with these guys."

"You think Motherlode is a colony from the Terran Alliance era?" she asked, that was way earlier than most other thought. The main line of thought among the ROM analysts seemed to be late Hegemony era. "That makes no sense! They have Lostech from the Star League era" she protested.

"People are far too fixated on what small Lostech trinkets the Motherloders might have to notice what Motherlode don't have. They don't have any of the standard military technology that has been spread around the Inner Sphere for centuries. They don't have any spacecraft capable of interstellar travel that have not been identified as an Inner Sphere prize." Martin called up several images of various

jumpships and dropships on the screens. "Particularly the Motherlodgers lack of jump technology greatly helps to explain why they decided on such a reckless and dangerous gambit to set up Vorax. They don't have any battlemechs that aren't salvage or kitbashes. They don't have any aerospace assets at all, the fighters they brought into Port Krin are all turbine engined. They have no modern armor plating" he switched to an image of a GDI tank with a deep laser burn slashed straight through the massive front armor plate. "They have no infantry lasers, except what appears to be a light weight target designator." An image of an infantry man in action with an assault rifle popped up on a side screen. "They have none of this! Indeed they probably never had access to any of that technology to begin with."

"They could have just lost the technology." She protested. "Many world regress to steam and even below before they are rediscovered."

"Yesss... But in that case why this?" he switched the holographic display back to the fake Terra "If they do originate from a more recent era why not use something more discreet than this?" He nodded at the planet. "I ran an analysis of this image with our historic records back all the way to the earliest days of space travel. It seems the image originated at some time in the early years of the last millennium and the main modifications seems to be spreading the developed areas into China and India as well as removing the war scars in Russia, which makes some sense if you are baiting pirates."

"No. Something is still wrong..." She just couldn't pin down exactly what. Martin was watching her with a big smile on his face. "Why not use actual images of their own world? Given the size and technology of the GDI the Motherlodgers world would seem to be advanced enough to draw a response."

"That is an interesting question Pat. Indeed it is the principal enigma in this problem" Martin said with a grin as he leaned back in his chair. "It is something of a paradox isn't it? Why not use photos and video of Motherlode itself to bait the trap? All Vorax's thugs would need to do is catch a brief glimpse of the actual Motherlode once they jump in and they would know something was very wrong."

Martin looked a bit smug as he prepared to drop what he obviously thought was a bomb. Patricia would not be disappointed.

"The only explanation I have" Martin proclaimed dramatically "is that once Vorax's boys jumped in they were not expected to jump out again. The trap was sprung the moment the fleet jumped in system."

"But that would mean..." Patricia started a bit stunned at this latest revelation.

"Yes, the GDI would need a fairly large space combat capacity, particularly considering their generally inferior technology. They would need at least enough to cover the main jump points as well as any pirate points. That hints at a fairly solid presence in space, many orbital facilities and such, which might make fresh imagery of Motherlode hard to edit." Martin continued. "Also by keeping their home world cloaked in secrecy with the Terran gambit they have not given away any vital intelligence in case Vorax don't take the bait. They conceal themselves from more serious threats behind an obvious bluff. If the information ended up in the hands of any of the great houses who have more resources to check out the data than a periphery pirate chief it would immediately be dismissed as an obvious hoax."

"Just how much of a military space force do they have?" Patricia demanded.

"I don't know." Martin said with a shrug. "I don't have enough information to determine that."

"Speculate!" She ordered. No one had fought any major space engagements in centuries. That the GDI would set up a large scale jump point ambush was alarming. Apart from the Order's hidden caches at Ross and Lutyen, which she herself was only made aware of after she was promoted to head the FWL desk, the art and tools of true space warfare was long lost. Those ships were the Order's ultimate equalizer in case any of the successor states ever turned truly belligerent.

Martin didn't reply immediately.

"This is not in the report and only my personal opinion Pat." He finally said and as she nodded he continued. "Their capacity in this area is hard to pinpoint since we only have indirect indications of it even existing, but extrapolating the observed lack of fusion power and energy weaponry in the GDI the most likely form of space based military would be some form of primitive missile ships, perhaps with ion engines for longer operations." He hesitated before continuing "Yes. I don't think we have seen anything from the GDI that would indicate more sophistication than that..."

Patricia sighed slightly in relief. She really didn't want to have to side with the interventionists on the CSN issue. Patricia was a firm believer in Blake's vision that Comstar should help humanity survive the follies of its insane leadership by preserving the blessings of the past golden age of the Star League. But as the Third Succession war ground on into a new millennium she found herself wondering just how long is this was going to be allowed to continue. The great houses obviously loved their war even more than they hated each other since they had halted their savage destruction just short of rendering each other incapable of continuing the fighting. The emergence of the CSN and the destruction of the pirate nest at Antallos was the first positive thing to have happened to that suffering region in decades, perhaps centuries, and some openly wanted to destroy it over a few suspected lostech trinkets. Some members of the order were still far too occupied with tearing down rather than building up.

"...their military hardware, what we have managed to observe of it, is almost a perfect match for what the Terran Alliance fielded a thousand years ago. Naturally with a few improvements made over the centuries." He waved to a cluttered work bench where various components lay scattered about but still connected by a snake pit of wiring. "They never developed the modern computer so they continued to refine the old binary technology to exceptional levels."

"You trashed the Motherlode computer! Do you realize how much our agents paid for that thing?" she exclaimed.

"Uhh... I wouldn't say thrashed, it still works it is just a bit... larger."

More distributed." Martin replied hesitantly. "I needed to see what makes it tick."

She laughed. "Oh don't worry Martin you can keep it, we have a couple more of them. So an ancient Terran Alliance colony is the answer to the CSN puzzle in your opinion?" She looked him in the eyes "It is thin."

"Yes, but somewhat denser than the other theories that are floating around. Most of those are damn near invisible." Martin sat silent for a few moments. "I even think I have identified the exact colony fleet involved."

"What? You know the specific fleet involved? You still have not entirely convinced me that Motherlode originates from the Alliance era."

"I know that, we can't exclude the possibility that Motherlode could be of more recent origin until we get more data. But that is unlikely to happen until the location of their world becomes general knowledge, and given the manner of their reintroduction to human society I can certainly understand their reluctance to reveal themselves, even to us."

"So who do you think they are?" Martin's speculation could on occasion be interesting.

"Have you heard of Commodore Mary Celeste and the Charon fleet?"

Patricia barked out a short laugh.

"The Charon fleet? It is a spacer myth, Martin!"

"Yes, but like most myths there is a bit of truth in it." Martin replied defensively "Charon wasn't the flagship, just a transport among many in the convoy. Mary Celeste wasn't the convoy commander but the colony supervisor and her real name was Marika Seles. The Charon convoy was one of the most ambitious colonizing projects that the Alliance had attempted thus far. It was an effort to calm the opposition from the poorer member nations of the Alliance to the

colonization program by inviting them onboard. For the first time substantial participation from China, India and Africa was included in a major colony mission. Naturally they sent their best and their brightest to take advantage of the rare opportunity that had presented itself, so when the fleet misjumped the entire operation boomeranged so badly on the Alliance government that it had to face a no-confidence vote."

Martin waved toward the slowly rotating holographic planet.

"That is almost exactly the Terra they left a millennium ago. They arrive at Motherlode, probably with their jumpdrives burnt out and dropshuttles damaged but they are fortunate and manage to make planetfall on a hospitable planet. A friendly environment with plentiful food sources would allow them to maintain most of their technological base; interstellar space travel and fusion power seems to be their main losses. They follow the original colony plan for the fleet calling for five independent settlements on the planet. As a result they keep the ethnic and linguistic divides that have been observed in the units serving on Antallos, probably the political divides as well. The Charon fleet was sub-divided according to nationalities and that mirrors nicely what we have seen of them on Antallos."

"You think the CSN is divided internally? Even after all this time?" That could present interesting opportunities. The internal divisions in the Free Worlds League had provided the Order with many options, for good and bad, to further Blake's vision over the years. The low water mark in recent times being Kristofur's disgraceful involvement in Anton Marik's disastrous rebellion.

"Yes I do. Coalition of Sovereign Nations, why emphasize that the nations are sovereign unless it is to reassure themselves? Global Defense Initiative, why would any unified planetary government need to emphasize that it's military is indeed global? But most of that is nothing but my guesses, what I think I can say with reasonable certainty, based on the limited information available, is that an early Terran Alliance lost colony is the most obvious suspect regarding the origin of Motherlode in my opinion. Given the time span involved what seems to some to be Lostech from the Star League could simply

be local developments and refinement on their Terran Alliance tech base over time."

As Patricia left Martin's smelly dungeon and walked along the barren grey corridors of Hiltonhead's lowest levels she pondered his analysis. It was way off from what most of the division's ROM analysts were saying and what the Precentor Atreus and the rest of the First Circuit chose to believe. But then Martin was brilliant at finding needles in haystacks, she had recognized that long ago when she recruited him, and there was a ring of truth in his work. It explained far more of the odd facts and strange events than any other theory she had seen so far.

By the time Patricia Copperfield reached her office she had reached a conclusion. The First Circuit were wrong! The Primus thought of CSN as little more than a small glorified Star League cache to be herded into the fold. Precentor Dieron considered it to be nothing more than a belligerent Successor state – one small enough for her to vent her frustrations on. But if Martin was right there was a golden opportunity here. A world untouched by the corruption of the Inner Sphere, an industrialized world perhaps capable of lifting the surrounding region out of stagnation and decline. The CSN certainly seemed to have such ambitions judging by the reports coming in from the Outworlds Alliance and Antallos itself.

"Blake's will..." she whispered to herself.

The risk was great, but the reward might be even greater. Give the peoples of the Inner Sphere a 'shining city on the hill', an example of what might have been and let them contrast that vision to the corruption and incompetence of their current masters. Then they would be ready. Then Comstar could finally realize Blake's vision, for what one world on the edge of known space could do for Antallos and the Outworlds Alliance Comstar and Terra could certainly do a thousand fold for the Inner Sphere.

Amir's Café, Center of Port Krin
March 3rd, 3023

Special Agent Jim Gant left the busy streets of Port Krin and escaped the merciless sun. Entering Amir's, he took a look at the surroundings and was pleasantly surprised. The arabian-style café was, if at all, looking even more decent from the inside than the facade outside suggested. The air was noticeably cooler than outside and the scent of fresh coffee lingered in the air. A waitress welcomed him and asked whether he wanted a table, but Gant told her that he was already meeting somebody.

It was just after noon and Amir's was almost deserted, which allowed Gant to quickly spot Captain Révész sitting at a table in the far corner from the entrance. He walked over and sat down, greeting the fellow police officer.

"That's quite the nice place you invited me in. I'll have to remember the adress."

"Sure. Amir's is a bit of an insider tip when it comes to finding a good café here in town. You absolutely have to try the coffee."

"I'll remember it, Jenci. Now, I guess there's another reason you called me here."

"We might finally have a lead on the PKLF."

"Oh? Has there been anything new from the site of that latest attack?"

Reévész smiled. "No, there hasn't. And my superiors are by now chomping at the bit. More than a dozen attacks and we still have nothing. But today, I found a little message in my mail, with a request for a meeting here concerning the PKLF. Signed by nobody else but Danilo Cremonesi."

Gant just raised his eyebrows. "So, who's that exactly?"

"Ah, sorry. I forgot. Cremonesi is,-" Révész stopped in mid-sentence as

the waitress had reached their table and ordered two cups of black coffee for him and Gant "-well, since you came in and kicked out Vorax and his allies he's the perhaps biggest kingpin still in town."

"A crime boss? Why are we going to talk to him? And why isn't he behind bars?"

"Simple, Jim. For one, Cremonesi didn't do anything when GDI marched in here. He and Vorax hated each others guts and the only thing keeping Vorax from starting an outright war and dismantle Cremonesi's operation was that it'd weaken Vorax enough to make him vulnerable. That, and Cremonesi is just about the least worst of the surviving bosses, which makes him somewhat low-priority compared to the others. Jim, I *know* that man. Remember, I was part of the organised crime department, or what passed as one, before GDI turned up and believe me, he gave us a good deal of work. He wouldn't ask us for a personal meeting if he didn't have something."

"So, what can we expect? Do you have any information on this guy?"

Révész simply laid down the information. "Short version: Danilo Cremonesi, 51 years old, has a wife, 49, two natural and one adopted kid, all in their late teens or early twenties. Parents unknown, but died when he was young. He joined up with a gang on the South Side at age 13. Much of the following years are unclear, but with 30 years he was the boss of his own little organisation and one of the up-and-coming stars in the local crime scene, though he never showed any real ambitions to become the top dog. Lives in an estate a few clicks out of town. The place lasted through the invasion rather well, mostly because Cremonesi remained strictly neutral at the time."

"He runs a number of legal businesses, mainly construction and logistics, and uses them as front companies. On the shadowy side, he's got protection rackets in a few parts of town and a major stake in illegal gambling and prostitution. On top of that, he's the perhaps biggest information broker on this planet. Some small scale smuggling and weapons trafficking, too. He absolutely despises drug dealers and slavers, though, for unknown reasons. When he took over the South Side he gave all dealers and slavers two weeks to get out. Those that didn't comply ended up with unfriendly people applying

hammers and chisels to their kneecaps."

"Yikes, that's heavy-handed." Révész' answer was interrupted by the waitress bringing the two cups of coffee to the table. Gant took a sip and immediately resolved to visit this place again.

Révész shook his head. Things like these reminded him that Gant hadn't grown up in this city. "Actually, that was rather tame given the kind of stuff other gang bosses pulled at the time. Cremonesi has always been more of a businessman than a warlord. He's got a few platoons of professional infantrymen, mostly ex-mercenaries. About two overstrength companies. But the few times he went into actual turf wars, he relied more on bribery, assassinations and hiring outside help than sheer brute force. The only exception was six years ago." He shuddered. "The October Massacre is what the media dubbed it. It also pretty much marked Cremonesi's rise to one of the first tier players in the city, the first time he really showed just how many strings he could pull."

"The Ristovska Cartel, one of the big players at the time, tried moving their businesses in drugs and slavery into his territory. After a bit of scraping between sides because he didn't let them in, they lost their patience and decided to try and *coerce* him. They broke into the house of Cremonesi's second-in command and... well, as far as we could put the pieces together they first forced the poor guy to watch as they killed his wife and older daughter before cutting him up and letting him bleed out. And then his younger daughter came back home and found her entire family brutally murdered."

Révész was looking very ill. "I was part of the taskforce given that case. Man, I wish I could forget the picture when we arrived at the place. Anyways, we never got much together, mostly because Vorax had no real interest in us succeeding. Cremonesi adopted the poor girl. I actually met him back then, at the funeral. When I asked him whether he knew anything about it, he simply told me to keep out of this in a very friendly and polite manner."

"I'm not exactly a coward, but his tone and the look in his eyes... good lord, I had never seen the man like that before. The same expressionless facade he normally keeps up, but behind that... not

even anger or anything, just an utterly brutal and cold determination. It gave me the shivers. I knew then and there that something bad was about to happen and that I definitely wanted to be far away when it happened."

"For a week after the murders, things were quiet, save for the Cartel continuing to infringe on his territory and getting even more bold. And when it happened, it happened so fast, nobody had any time to even react properly. October 1st, 3017 at about 8 o'clock local time, Cremonesi hit back. First target was the barracks of their combat troops, including the lance of medium Mechs they loved toting around to scare off smaller competitors. Cremonesi's men drove a tanker truck full of a mix of fuel, explosives and inferno gel straight through the walls of their compound Downtown and blew the barracks into smithereens before an infantry contingent went over the rubble and shot all survivors before bagging the Mechs and getting away."

"Over the next four hours, smaller groups of infantry attacked Cartel holdings all over the city, systematically storming their hideouts and killing every member they could get. And then, Cremonesi pulled two light Mechs out of his pocket, which together with about a full company of footsloggers went directly for the headquarters of the Cartel. They forced the defenders to retreat inside and... well, one of the Mechs was a Firestarter. They burned the thing to the ground, with the people still inside. All in all, the Ristovska Cartel lost about 250 or so people that you could have described as full-scale members in their organisation, as well as quite a few minor dealers and thugs. They were finished."

Gant couldn't fully believe this. 'Jesus, that makes the Valentine Massacre look like a joke.' "What happened then?"

"The next few days after *that*, most of the Cartel members that got away were killed off one by one. A few escaped, but Cremonesi put a price on each one of them high enough that they're pretty much dead the moment they set foot in this city again. And the rest of the big crimelords in town, including Vorax, went completely crazy. Nobody had expected anything like this from the old bastard. He always had had a bit of a reputation as being laid back and averse to really get

his hands dirty. And then he suddenly comes out and massacres a major player here in town in an utterly one-sided slaughter. Pretty much everyone got caught flat-footed by that and it shook up things somewhat fierce."

Gant grimaced. "And the Mechs and men?"

"Unknown, both the two lights and that lance of mediums. Nobody ever saw them again. Rumor is that the old bastard still has them hidden in reserve in case of anyone trying to start a full-scale gang war with him. The men were a mix of short-term hired mercenaries and his own guys. That said, Cremonesi was always one of the most peaceful bosses here in town. The man is content with making profit and generally tries to not piss off anyone. He seems to regard violence as a costly and largely unnecessary last resort. He also runs a very good insurance fund for the families of his people and knows how to not create enough evidence. Vorax repeatedly tried to get us to dig up good evidence on him in the past, but the man knows how to cover his tracks just good enough that you can't prove his involvement. Hell, the October Massacre? He has literally hundreds of witnesses testifying that he was at the other end of town, shopping and going into an expensive restaurant together with his family and bodyguards. It's the same as always. Everybody knows that he's behind it, but nobody ever manages to get real evidence on it. And his people don't talk. Period."

"He's adapting rather well, too. His legal businesses are booming and his smuggling and arms trafficking stopped completely as far as we can tell. It looks like he genuinely aims at going legit. Add all those factors and you can see why the guys from organised crime put him at low priority."

"I... see." Gant wasn't exactly comfortable with this, but in the last few months he had learned a few things about Port Krin and could see why even the new organised crime department was acting like this. The town was still having an almost overwhelming problem with the surviving mobsters and with what Jenci had told him right now, it made genuine sense to put this particular guy on the backburner and concentrate on the more brutal and less intelligent criminals first. "So, when is he coming?"

"Any minute now, he tends to be a bit early. Once he's coming, try to let me handle the talk. Ahh, there he is." Révész answered, gesturing at the entrance to the café. Gant watched as an old, gray-haired, but apparently still rather healthy man with a noticeable tan in a business suit, followed by two people that just screamed 'bodyguard', entered the café. The man walked over in their direction without any apparent hurry while the two gorillas took positions guarding the niche their table was situated in.

Cremonesi shook their hands and sat down. "Hello, Lieutenant, no, it's Captain now, isn't it? Captain Révész. It is as always a pleasure to meet you. How's your daughter doing? I heard she's entering one of the schools our new management opened up. Oh, and I believe I didn't meet your companion before, Mr. -?"

Révész answered. "Gant. Special Agent Jim Gant. He's from, as you describe it, our new management and here to help building up our police force. And the pleasure is all mine Mr. Cremonesi. My daughter is doing fine, thank you. I hope your family is doing well, too?"

"Thank you, Captain. And yes, my family is doing well. My youngest son just finished his private education and he actually plans to visit one of the colleges the CSN are building. He has always been a smart boy. But enough of the small talk. I invited you to this meeting and time is money."

"So, why did you invite us, Mr. Cremonesi?"

"The Port Krin Liberation Front."

"Go on."

"I think I have a few informations on them that you could find very useful, Captain. You see, one of my foremen in a construction company lately saw one of his workers in the aftermath of the latest attack, very close to that office building that got bombed. The next day, when he, careful to not show his intentions of course, talked with this man, he received some rather creative lies for an answer. At

that moment, I decided to investigate a bit more and the results were rather interesting. Somebody is operating out of an old ruin at the edge of town. I thought of them as simple smugglers at first, but with these new details coming in, I had to realise that I stumbled over something entirely different."

"Interesting. You don't happen to be able to give me a name and an address, Mr. Cremonesi? Or some actual hard information?"

"Oh, I can send you another message containing all this, Captain. In fact, consider it done."

At this, Gant couldn't but interrupt. "And what, Mr. Cremonesi, is your profit in this?"

"That is easy, Special Agent. Stability. I am happy with the status quo. As things stand, you undoubtedly know the direction my... business is taking at the moment. Now, this Port Krin Liberation Front, they're trying to upset the status quo. And not only that, but they're doing so without any regard to the existing structures here in the city. I am not exactly the only... *influential person* that'd prefer it if they met an early end. Given that, it is only natural for me to help you along with ending this unfortunate affair, don't you think?"

"Is that so?" Gant asked sceptically.

"You don't have any reason to believe otherwise, do you, Agent? But, if that's not enough to make you think that this is to my benefit, let's just say that you owe me one, gentlemen. The information will be sent to you via mail and arrive in an hour or two, Captain Révész." Cremonesi took a look at his wristwatch. "Oh, this late already? You will have to excuse me, gentlemen, I have a few more appointments today. It was a pleasure to meet you."

And with that, the man stood up, shook their hands and left the café, his bodyguards in tow.

Gant was the first one to speak. "Well, that was interesting. I'd never want to play Poker with this guy, he barely moved a single muscle on his face."

"You saw that slight smile by the end, Jim? For Cremonesi on a business meeting, that's almost an outburst of emotion. The way you jousting him right now earned some respect, I guess. But yeah, he's got one hell of a poker face. Might not be the worst thing if the rumors are true."

"Rumors?"

"Rumors have it that he plans to go into politics, perhaps campaigning for mayor. Now that'd be funny, wouldn't it? Well, let's see what he gives us and hope that it's worth something."

Gant, still trying to wrap his head around the first part of the statement, decided to just answer the second. "Your word to God's ear, Jenci."

**Port Krin Police Headquarters,
March 11th, 3023**

"That info from Cremonesi was worth gold. I think we have them. That Kitakawa guy, and we identified seven others, although we have no names yet. Seems like we hit the jackpot, so do we observe them a bit longer or shall we move in?"

"I don't know, Jim. Their attacks ceased for some reason, so I'd like to watch them a bit longer. But if they plan something big..."

"Just my thoughts. It's the old problem. If we wait, we run the danger of them pulling a big one or noticing something and going into cover. If we don't wait, we risk missing some of them. We haven't seen anyone new in the last days, though, so I guess we have them all. I'd say we should just bust the place. Perhaps try and spy on them from closer in for a few days, but doing that with them holed up in the basement of that old ruin in the outskirts would be pretty hard to--"

Gant was rudely interrupted by the ringing of Révész' phone. Révész took up the receiver and started speaking.

"Captain Révész here..."

The FBI agent hated listening to phone conversations in this one-sided way. It always confused him to no end and he was never able to deduct much of anything, so he decided to take a look at the photos made during the last days. Then he realised that Révész' voice was growing more alarmed by the second.

"...understood... Oh damnit, we're on the way!"

He put the phone away, put a note on the table and hurriedly stood up, going for the hat stand in the corner of the office. "We have to go. Now."

While standing up, too, Gant asked apprehensively: "Another attack?"

"No, worse."

"Then what?"

"A construction company just reported the theft of over half a ton of high explosives and the way that stuff got stolen is almost identical to the stolen chemicals the PKLF used in that attack on the market two weeks ago."

"Oh shit."

"Just my thoughts. My superiors are just short of going berserk. Call up your Rainbow buddies, we're raiding that place, NOW. Our SWAT detail isn't nearly ready by the training reports your people have written, so we'll request you to send in Rainbow instead. Seems like the PKLF just made the decision for us."

Outskirts of Port Krin, March 11th, 3023

Like any soldier, Domingo 'Ding' Chavez hated waiting. He hated it almost as much as having to watch his fellow soldiers walking into danger while he had to stay back, bound by his rank. At such times, he regreted having accepted the promotion to become Rainbow Six. And as such, all he could do now was to watch Rainbow teams 1 and 2 moving in on the hideout of the Port Krin Liberation Front.

He still worried. Had he missed anything? All 8 identified tangos were confirmed to be present in the building at the edge of Port Krin. The local police had spent the last week getting as much information as possible on this abandoned derelict and it had been confirmed that the PKLF cell was only using the ground floor and the basement. The single stairwell access to the upper floors of the old apartment building had collapsed years ago, rendering the upper floors almost inaccessible. This left a fire escape tunnel from the basement and two entrances on the ground floor as entry points. After much planning, they had decided to split off 4 men from Team 1 to infiltrate through the tunnel while the remaining 3 4-man fireteams would simultaneously storm the place through the entrances on the ground floor, with the snipers of both teams covering all ways out of the building, while a single 2-man team would act as a reserve. An entry through a window had been ruled out. The windows on the ground floor were all boarded up and both he and his teamleaders had come to the conclusion that trying to break through them would be too loud and too slow and hence cost them the element of surprise.

Until now, the plan had gone off without a hitch. All teams were just short of being in position, the snipers were ready and there had been no indication of any guards in place. Only two things were nagging Chavez: The tunnel team was lagging behind after Sergeant Connolly, the explosives expert of Team 1, had stopped the fireteam to disarm two booby traps. And, more importantly, the heavy duty construction of the outer walls of the building was interfering with the heartbeat sensors, turning them all but useless until his men could move into the building.

Once more, Chavez cursed the habit of the old Star League to build things to last. According to the city records, the old ruin had once been part of an SL administration compound and like with seemingly everything they did, the Star League engineers hadn't known the meaning of the term 'overkill' when they constructed the place. No wonder that it was still standing after literally centuries of abandonment! And now it was endangering his plan and all he could do was watch from the safety of their transport van, with a local police captain and an FBI special agent looking over his shoulder, as his men had to storm and secure the building with less intelligence than they hoped for, the goal of capturing as many live tangos as possible (and Port Krin's police chief had made that very clear; they wanted to interrogate these guys, lest there were more cells of the PKLF that they didn't know about) and a large pile of explosives somewhere inside that they had to secure ASAP. Oh, and to round things up, half of his men had never been into a mission with Rainbow after he had to split up the original teams when the organisation was radically expanded with the formation of the CSN.

He shook his head, again regretting his decision to let himself get bumped up.

Like any soldier, 'Fumihiko Kitakawa' hated waiting. He had long since accepted the fact that much of his work was to simply sit around doing nothing, but he still hated it. Luckily, he thought, it wouldn't be long now. The entire strike team was assembled and One -- as a precaution, he never learnt even the cover names of his associates, just like they never learnt his -- was holding the final briefing. The preparations were complete. Transport had been arranged in an abandoned garage a few blocks away, everyone knew the plan for the attack on the GDI barracks in the city center down to the last detail and their cover-up had already been set and activated. In two hours, just after midnight, they would move out, split into two teams and get into position to hit the target just two hours before dawn. The plan called for a silent infiltration of the GDI compound followed by causing as much damage as possible with the explosives every team member was equipped with. One team for the officer quarters, one team for the motor pool. After that, the Loki agents would disperse, get into deep cover and leave the planet over the

span of the next few months. And even if things went wrong for some reason there were Nine and Ten, who had not been in direct contact with the cell since their first meeting on this planet and had laid low ever since. They would still be able to monitor the situation and report back to HQ eventually, just as an insurance.

A few minutes after their attack, their erstwhile hideout would be collapsed by the charges they had set shortly after their arrival. The countdown had already been triggered. Six had proven himself to be a true artist in that regard and he had set up the charges in such a way that any cleanup of the site would reveal just enough to make it look like a botched attempt at wiping out evidence. Evidence that would point in the direction of the Draconis Combine when it came to the inevitable question of who was responsible for the terror campaign in Port Krin that culminated in an attack on vital GDI assets.

He wondered whether he should try and get a nap after the briefing. One had rejected the idea of posting guards outside anyway. The surprises they had in place at the back door and the alarms installed on the two ground level doors would draw less suspicion towards the seemingly abandoned building, he had reasoned, especially as the few rooms they actually used made sure that no light would escape outside, leaving the building looking like just another abandoned ruin like the dozens upon dozens that still dominated the outskirts of the city.

The next moment, his thoughts were rudely interrupted.

Sergeant Paddy Connolly was probing a closed door in the fire escape tunnel. After having already disarmed three booby traps, he had given up on keeping with the planned schedule. The fireteam was late already anyway and though whoever set those traps appeared to be only a mildly educated amateur with primitive tools, Connolly was not going to take any chances. He slipped a tiny camera under the door to check for more surprises. Not finding anything suspicious, he signalled the rest of the fireteam that he would open it. Sergeant Mike Pierce, the other 'oldtimer' in the fireteam signalled his acknowledgement a split second before the two newcomers, Sergeant

Gang Ts'ao of the People's Liberation Army Special Operations Forces and Wachtmeester (Sergeant) Mart Wieringa of the Royal Netherlands Army. Seeing that everyone was ready, he slowly pushed open the door.

The small motion sensor was one of the finest products of draconian workmanship. Hidden as it was in a small crack of the tunnel walls, it was hardly visible at all, even at a second glance. As Sergeant Connolly slowly opened the door, the sensor registered this motion and triggered a delayed fuse on the few grams of explosives hidden in the walled off and nigh-perfectly hidden compartment below it. A full two seconds afterwards, just as the sergeant took his first step through the doorframe, the charge went off with a deafening bang that was only reinforced by the cramped quarters of the tunnel. It turned it's own casing and the thin wall of it's compartment into a hail of shrapnel that hit the completely unprepared man.

The new 'IS-issue' body armor the Rainbow teams had been equipped with was, compared to the now outdated kevlar armor of older days, a veritable miracle and able to cope easily with this kind of attack. It did not, however, achieve full-body coverage. A single piece of shrapnel hit Sergeant Connolly directly below his helmet and pierced his skull. The veteran was dead before his body had hit the ground.

Former Delta Force Sergeant Mike Pierce was not so lucky. While the body of his brother-in-arms had shielded him from the blast and shrapnel of the explosive charge, it did nothing to stop the second part of the trap. Stored in the compartment together with the small charge had been several 40mm grenades which now detonated sympathetically and explosively spread their contents. The last thing Mike Pierce saw was a veritable wall of flames rushing at him as the inferno gel ignited, followed by a sense of nothing but pain.

Sergeants Ts'ao and Wieringa, standing a few meters behind the lead pair, jumped back just in time to evade the worst of the blaze, with only Ts'ao having part of his uniform catch fire. Instinctively, he dropped to the ground and tried putting out the flames. Wieringa, standing the farthest away from the fire only momentarily dropped, more out of instinct than anything else. Even before he could fully comprehend the situation, his training kicked in. He grabbed Ts'ao

and began dragging him away from the flames while frantically shouting into his radio.

"MAN DOWN! MAN DOWN!"

For perhaps half a second, Fumihiko Kitakawa and his associates were frozen in place upon the sound of what was clearly one of the booby traps at the basement entry going off. Then the entire room exploded into action. Most of them had already armed themselves and the remainder immediately picked up the submachineguns and grenades. A moment later, they could hear the unmistakable sound of both doors to the ground floor being kicked in.

"Case Blue." The two words, spoken by One, immediately set them into motion. The floor plan of the building was in their favour, funneling any enemy coming through the ground floor entrances into a single axis of advance. The Loki team had further reinforced this advantage by walling off several corridors. Case Blue called for a staggered retreat towards the basement until they could fully assess the situation and their preparations had made sure that the room they were in constituted the only access to the corridor leading to the stairwell into said basement.

Almost instinctively, they formed up into two-man teams. Seven and Eight covered the door that the attackers would have to come through while everyone else stormed into the stairwell access. Just as Kitakawa left the room, the door at its other end exploded inwards.

Staff Sergeant George Tomlinson swore under his breath as he and Steve Lincoln threw their flashbangs through the blown door. The booby trap at the basement entrance had already demolished the plan. They now had to move fast or they would fully lose the element of surprise. The flashbangs went off and Lincoln immediately filed through the door.

Tomlinson went after him, weapon raised. Their senses were assaulted by muzzle flashes and the sound of gunfire. Lincoln spotted a man in civilian clothes holding, no, firing a weapon at the other

end of the room and dropped the tango with a burst to the head. His view swept throughout the room and spotted an open door and, more importantly, a second target aiming squarely at him. Before he could shift his weapon, the man went down, blood splattering on the wall behind him as the rest of the fireteam stormed into the room behind him, the other two teams on their heels.

He could see that Tomlinson was down and was about to announce it when the former Delta operative began standing up and signalled him that he was okay. The other two members of the fireteam, Sergeants Loiselle and Fallaci, quickly moved across the room towards the other door as the second fireteam entered. Just as they were about to reach the door, both jumped back. "Grenade!"

Sergeant First Class Homer Johnston, situated on a small hill in sight of the target building, was aiming his rifle down at a series of windows on the ground floor. He had just seen movement behind those. And the radio transmissions made it clear that no Rainbow member had entered that corridor yet. Additionally, it sounded like things were going decidedly not according to plan. Johnston saw another figure moving through a gap in the boards nailed over the windows and, in a split-second decision, took the shot. And then he swore as another target passed along the window while he was chambering the next round.

Kitakawa could hear one of the enemy soldiers shout a warning just before his fragmentation grenade exploded. He didn't stop and hurried down the corridor directly behind One. They were almost to the stairwell as it happened. A shot pierced through the boarding over one of the windows and hit his superior straight into the hip, sending the man down to the ground. Kitakawa ducked but kept going forward. Even if One was still alive, he was out of the fight and there was no way to help him now. He made it to the stairwell, passing Two and Six, both having taken position in two alcoves along the corridor when the flashbangs went off behind him.

Louis Loiselle jumped through the doorway into the corridor. He

immediately spotted another tango holed up in an alcove at the other end of the corridor through his sights and pulled the trigger before realising the motion his target had just carried out. 'Oh shit, not again!' some detached part of his mind screamed. "Grenade!", he yelled while jumping into a similar alcove just across the corridor, Fallaci behind him quickly jumping back into the room they had just cleared. As if to underline the wisdom of that decision, a burst of gunfire flew up the corridor just before the grenade went off.

He swung back into the corridor and saw another tango peeking out of the stairwell access to the basement, aiming down the sights of a submachinegun. He pulled the trigger and his target went down. As he called out the confirmation, he saw movement at the edge of his vision as the second fireteam entered the corridor and- 'Merde....' "Man down!" Sergeant Ecole Fallaci was lying on the ground, bleeding out of three neat holes in his forehead.

Sergeant Geoff Bates led the second fireteam down the corridor, just pausing for a split-second as he saw another downed tango at the side of the corridor. 'Must be the one Homer got.' He closed in on the man, aiming his weapon at the head of the target. His target was still breathing, but clearly not in any shape to fight, judging by the slowly gathering pool of blood on the ground. He went closer to check on the tango when the man groaned. Fixated on the sound, Bates almost missed the slight movement farther below. Looking down, the blood in his veins ran cold. He was just about to shout the warning as the grenade the injured man had hidden went off, killing Bates and the wounded tango in a hail shrapnel.

Everything was going to hell.

Kitakawa entered the large storeroom that made up most of the basement, Four and Five already securing the entrance. From up the stairs, he could hear more gunfire and grenades going off. It was over. Whoever these attackers were, they were professionals, heavily equipped and had brought enough manpower to push their attack through. Between the three of them, he and his men stood no chance to stop them. He knew what he had to do.

"I'm enacting Case Red." The words were spoken calmly and without any apparent emotion from him, but he saw the realisation in their eyes. His words could as well have been a death sentence. No, he corrected himself, they *were* a death sentence. Theirs, and his own. Both of them just nodded and kept watching the entrance. As he ran towards the control unit situated on a crate at the center of the room, part of him wondered if there was any way out of this, but he discarded the thought. The orders were clear. The mission came first, always. And capture was *not* an option. He owed his entire life to the Commonwealth and if he had to sacrifice it on this god-forsaken rock at the other end of the Inner Sphere to salvage his mission, then there was no question to be asked.

Picking up the remote control unit for the charges they had set to demolish the building, he reset the countdown to 3 minutes while taking cover behind the crate. With some luck, they would resist long enough to draw more of the enemy in before the charges went off. Finished, he calmly dropped the device to the floor and put a burst from his submachinegun into it. Now all the fuses on the charges in the basement would continue to count down independently, with no practical way to stop them in time.

In that moment, a flashbang went off at the entrance and the gunfire started. Half blind, Kitakawa could still see one of the figures entering the room go down. He calmly aimed at another intruder and squeezed off a burst, sending his target down. Another man came through the door and the last thing the Loki agent saw was the muzzle of an unfamiliar type of submachinegun lighting up.

"Clear. Shit, we need a medic! We have men down here."

Chief Micheal Thorp, the new explosives expert of Rainbow Team 2, surveyed the room. The last three tangos were down, but so were Sergeants Houston and Fisher. Fisher began standing up. "I think I'm okay. Vest took it." He grimaced. "Shit, it hurts like hell." Feldwebel Weisz, the last member of the third fireteam, was giving first aid to Houston, who was definitely not in such a good shape, judging by the blood Thorp could see. "He took one to the throat. Give me a second

to stabilise him. we need to get him to a hospital, fast."

Thorp ordered Fisher to help Weisz before continuing to take a look at the room and the downed tangos. He noticed the markings on the crates in the room. Some bore unintelligible, japanese-looking markings, but on two others, the markings were unmistakable. 'Oh hell, these guys were no amateurs and that's enough equipment down here to fight a small war! What the hell did we get into?' He felt the adrenaline slowly going back after what had perhaps been the longest minute or so in his life. Stepping over the body at the rough center of the room, he recognised Fumihiro Kitakawa from the briefings. "So, who the hell have you been, sport?", he muttered to himself. Then, his gaze fell on a shot-up device on the ground next to the body. It began to dawn to him when he looked at one of the columns lining the room, spotting something out of place. Or rather, perfectly in place.

"HOLY SHIT!" He started running, his adrenaline kicking back in with a vengeance. "GET OUT! They rigged the place! I say again, they rigged the place!" Thorp stormed over to help the others with Houston as the radio channels exploded with shouting. With all due care and a lot more haste, they carried Houston up the stairs and to the exit, being the last of the teams to clear the building. They were barely 50 meters away as the charges started going off in a rather anticlimatic series of almost harmless sounding bangs. Everybody went down and watched in horror as the old apartment building slowly collapsed into itself, its structural supports pulverised by more than a dozen small demolition charges.

Apartment building, 2 miles away

Nine watched with disgust as the hideout of his team collapsed. The charges going off this early could only mean that something had gone horribly wrong and that most of the team was dead.

He shook his head. Orders were clear. He and Ten would go into deep cover immediately, try to find out whatever they could about what had happened without taking any risks and then leave the planet for good at the next opportunity. He cursed. It was not the first time he was part of a botched operation, but he still despised losses.

Almost as much as botched operations.

Outskirts of Port Krin, 90 minutes later

To say that Domingo Chavez was pissed would have been the understatement of the day. 'What landmine did we just step on?' It was clear that whatever the Port Krin Liberation Front had been, it wasn't a bunch of self-designated weekend freedom fighters. They had stumbled upon a black operation in the worst way possible. And four of his men had paid the ultimate price for this discovery.

Even more, he thought, they had been *lucky*. Sam Houston was being operated on, the bullet having just barely missed his jugular and spine. George Tomlinson and Joshua Fisher were only alive thanks to the new vests. Louiselle had had to dig enough shrapnel out of his body armor to shock even the old veteran to the bone after he hadn't even felt the impacts during the fight. Ts'ao and Wieringa had both gotten themselves a nice tan and barely escaped the tunnel as the inferno gel consumed the limited amount of oxygen in the cramped quarters and set off all the ammunition and grenades Connolly and Pierce had on them. And if Thorp hadn't seen those charges... Chavez shuddered at the thought. Whoever these guys had been, they had been frighteningly competent and fanatical.

At least they had been able to get everyone out before the place went down, including the bodies of Fallaci and Bates. Connolly and Pierce, however... After the pirate invasion, someone had described inferno gel as the bastard offspring of napalm and thermite to Ding. At the time he'd been skeptical, but after today's events he didn't doubt it anymore. After the gel in the tunnel had burnt out, the only remains they had found of their fallen comrades had been the molten remains of their body armour and weapons, surrounded by a pile of ash.

Stepping out of the deserted command van with a cup of coffee in his hands, his sight fell on the pile of rubble that had been a five-story building just an hour ago. Now, the place was cordoned off by GDI infantry and Port Krin police and Ding could see the first heavy equipment arriving. Whatever evidence was left after this disaster, digging it out would take its time.

GDI Headquarters, Port Krin
March 14th, 3023

Domingo Chavez knocked at the door of the conference room. "It's open" a voice shouted from inside. As he opened the door, Chavez could see Group Captain Samantha Swift rise from her seat to greet him, even as several other spooks continued sifting through the mess of documents on the large table dominating the center of the room, paying hardly any attention to him.

"Major Chavez", Swift and the Rainbow CO saluted each other.

"Ma'am. I've been told you have some results?"

"Yes, major, we do." She gestured at one of the seats. "Please, take a seat. We're by now through most of the stuff the excavation teams were able to dig out, and General Shao is going up the walls of his office from the implications."

"I gathered as much, ma'am." 'And not only him', Chavez added in his thoughts.

Swift simply spoke one word. "Miro."

On command, one of the analysts spoke up. "We're agreeing with your assessment that the Port Krin Liberation Front was not a mere homegrown terrorist organisation."

This annoyed Chavez, though he kept his thoughts to himself. 'No shit, Sherlock?'

The analyst continued. "Besides the eight bodies, the excavation found several crates containing small arms including silenced weapons, light body armour, night vision equipment, high-quality personal radios, mil-grade explosives and incendiaries that somehow survived the demolition. But the real shocker was a number of documents that were salvaged mostly intact and detailed their plans. Much of it were plans for the bombings they carried out in the last weeks, but they also included photographs and maps of this very

base, including copies of several construction blueprints of the refurbished Star League era buildings forming the core of the installation."

"What? How did they get those blueprints? And what about the explosives stolen from that construction company? Were they found?"

"The police department was able to trace the stolen explosives to a bunch of smugglers. Had nothing to do with our case, just a stupid coincidence. We looked into it, but there's no visible connection at all. Regarding the blueprints, one of the dead suspects has been a new worker in the archives of the city administration. Our best guess at this date is that he managed to access and copy the blueprints there, but we're still looking into it. Now, to continue, we also salvaged a whole set of plans with it. "

"And they frankly scared the crap out of everyone, especially base security." Swift interjected. "Your attack came just in time, Major. From what we could decipher, they planned their big show to take place that very night."

"How big are we talking here?" Chavez asked apprehensively.

"Really, really big. From what we gathered, they planned on infiltrating the base for one big sabotage tour, planting explosives and incendiaries. Targets were the motor pool, main ammo dump, barracks and officer quarters." Swift shuddered. "Security gave me an estimated 80% chance of them pulling it off without a hitch and the consequences would have been disastrous. Dozens to hundreds of casualties if their plan to firebomb the barracks had panned out, the attack on the officer quarters could have very well decapitated us, and the attacks aimed at the motor pool and the loss of the ammo dump would have destroyed hundreds of millions of dollars worth of equipment and supplies. Plus burning ordnance raining down on a sizeable part of the city."

"Madre de Dios!" Chavez muttered.

"You can say that loud, major."

"So, who the hell were these guys?"

Again one of the analysts spoke up. "We don't know for sure, sir. Our evidence in that direction is far more spotty than we'd like it to be, but some evidence is there. All eight identified PKLF members have arrived on Antallos during the last four months. What we right now have in terms of traces on them end on Periphery worlds to our galactic north for three of them, with the other five ending in the Tabayama Prefecture of the Draconis Combine, and the marking of the equipment crates identify them as coming from several Combine manufacturing centers."

"Are you telling me that these guys have been Draconis Combine spec-ops?"

"That's the most logical scenario given the current evidence, sir. DEST or ISF commandos, most likely. The only other explanation we came up with is that another Successor State is pulling a false flag against the Combine, but we're right now rating that as unlikely."

"Why?"

"The radios. They've been definitely identified as Combine-manufacture and damn rare ones, too."

"I don't understand. From what I've read up, personal radios aren't that rare in the Inner Sphere proper."

"Yes, sir, but the same cannot be said about ones with in-built high-end encryption protocols. While we have confirmation that all the Successor States use similar designs on a small scale, the ones we salvaged have been definitely identified and we're rating the chance of someone else getting a load of personal radios reserved for Combine special forces and high-end elite units to be rather low. Our tech specialists have gotten quite the shock, too. These things were definitely not what they expected in the face of the rather primitive comm protocols we encountered so far."

"What? Could you explain that to me? Or is it classified?"

"Not really classified, sir. It's a rather clunky solution they employ to compensate for their low computational power, but the thought of them using it on a larger scale is driving SigInt nuts. These high-end comms are using a randomly-determined, pre-recorded encryption pattern and then distribute it via small data storage modules. Unless you have the right module, decoding their transmission is as good as impossible, though we expect to still be able to jam them to a degree. The drawback for that is that their personal radios are bulky as hell compared to ours and each of those encryption modules has a lifetime of just a few days of use maximum, making any use of them on a large scale a logistical challenge. Not to mention that it increases the danger of someone else getting their hands on the encryption module, enabling him to just listen in at his own leisure."

"Ah, okay. So, that's it, then? We stumbled over a Combine strike team?"

Captain Swift answered the question. "As far as we can tell, yes, but it's not 100% certain and we're frankly not expecting to ever be. From what we have on the identities and backgrounds of these men, they're all looking more and more like being complete fabrications. We were able to confirm that they were working as a closed group without any outside help once they and their equipment arrived on-planet. Pretty much every IS spook we identified in the city is trying to find out who did it, too, and personally, I can just guess what kind of shitstorm we'd be kicking loose if we presented this stuff to the Combine embassy."

Chavez just shook his head. "Great."

Office of the President of the Parliament
Alpheratz, Outworlds Alliance, Periphery
May 16, 2007/3022

Looking out of the massive window overlooking the meticulously cared for courtyard of the Presidential Palace and Parliamentary building, one would think that President Neil Avellar was admiring the blooms, flowers and scattered trees dotting the courtyard. Yet one would be wrong. If asked, he wouldn't even be able to tell you if there were people out there, down in the courtyard. His thoughts were preoccupied by an event that pretty much had taken every nation in the Inner Sphere and Periphery by surprise when it had sprung up over eight months ago. An event, that seemingly also had a component that impacted the Alliance, albeit indirectly.

The sound of his office doors opening, followed by rapid footsteps beating a staccato on the marble floor, shook him from his thoughts.

"Your excellency", greeted the well dressed man as he stopped in front of president Avellar's desk, coming to attention, even though he'd not worn his uniform for the occasion. Then again, his position and personality was such that he eschewed the uniform, as did most of the people in his employ.

"Stephen", president Avellar greeted his guest with a smile as he turned around, motioning for him to sit down in one of the leather chairs in front of the desk.

Stephen Rios-Rivera, head of the Alliance's small intelligence agency sat down stiffly in the chair, suppressing his nervousness as usual when confronted by his nation's leader. At times like these, the notion that he, a poor kid from Cerberus Province could rise up to become one of the president's senior advisors, seemed like nothing more than a feverish fantasy, or one of those games of 'what if' he and his buddies used to play.

"Stephen, relax. Sitting at attention like you do, makes ME uncomfortable. Reminds me of my teachers, when I was a kid", Avellar joked as he leaned back in his chair.

Rios-Rivera gave a small smile before forcing himself to relax slightly, leaning against the back of the chair. Opening up the file folder in his lap, Stephen began his summary.

"Mister President, before I begin, I have to caution you. Due to our limited capabilities, most of the information I'm about to convey is garnered from public sources. Where possible we've tried to confirm it through our own sources, but until we can obtain more information, any conclusions would be speculation at best."

Nodding his understanding, Avellar motioned Stephen to continue.

"In the beginning of August 3021 a new, heretofore unknown, Periphery nation literally burst onto the scene by invading and taking over Port Krin on the planet of Antallos. They subsequently defended it against attacks from both the pirate Red Jack Ryan and the combined forces of a coalition of other city states, annihilating them. Comstar broadcast extended coverage by a New Avalon Press reporter, a Lois Lane, all across the Sphere and Periphery. They call themselves the Global Defense Initiative or GDI, representing the CSN. The main planet being Earth."

"Earth, Stephen? Not terribly imaginative, I'd say", Avellar stated, smiling slightly.

"I'd have to agree, Mister President. In any event, I've had my people comb through every record we could find, but so far, we've found nothing that even hints at the Alliance ever knowing or having had dealings with a state in the direction these 'Motherloaders' supposedly come from, or of any organizations with those names. Their usage of what appears to be lostech, also points in the direction of a state that has been unaffected by the Succession Wars", Stephen continued. "What is more important, however, is the the reason for their appearance. Port Krin's previous administrator assembled a mixed force of pirates and mercenaries to attack a world he called 'Motherload', because of its vast riches. Not only did they stop the invasion, they seem to have managed to acquire the services of some of the mercenaries that were part of the invasion fleet. Again, I must stress, all of this is hear-say we acquired from a few Alliance citizens

working in Port Krin. According to the report I have, at least two of the mercenary units employed by the GDI, were ones that Port Krin's administrator hired for his raid earlier."

"That would indicate that these people have deep pockets, to sway a mercenary to change allegiances", Avellar remarked, narrowing his eyes.

"That is our assessment too, Mister President", Stephen replied as he carefully went through the file. "However, I'd like to add that at least one of the mercenary companies, the Buron Cavalry, has always been an honorable outfit. Not one that would resort to piracy unless circumstances were dire. My people are still trying to find out if they were truly part of the initial invasion force and if so, when and why they then changed allegiances again."

"Stephen, we both know that most mercenaries that come to the Periphery are in dire straits, hoping to find something to stave off total disintegration", Avellar stated, leaning forward on his desk.

Rios-Rivera nodded at that. Very few worlds and nations in the Periphery were financially healthy. The Outworlds Alliance itself was by no means a prosperous nation. Over the years, shortages in transportation capacity as well as a multitude of other problems had seen the once huge nation shrink to a shadow of its former self. How many worlds had they abandoned because of this? How many people had been left to fend for themselves because the Alliance had no way to support them.

"Mister President, following the capture of Port Krin, GDI has done several things that, quite frankly, my analysts have no idea how to deal with", Rios-Rivera continued.

"Such as", the president questioned, intrigued.

"Declaring slavery illegal and grounds for severe penalties", Stephen replied. "Nobody can keep, trade, import or export slaves. All freed slaves are to be paid wages. Rule of Law and enforcement of said laws. Setting up medical facilities where citizens can get free health care. Urban Renewal projects aimed at repairing and expanding the

infrastructure of the city itself. There is even a concerted effort established regarding education."

President Avellar sat up in his chair, shock written all over his face, "Are you certain of this?"

"As certain as we can be, Mister President", Stephen nodded. "This information was supplied to us by several Alliance citizens, independent from each other, at different times, with emphasis on different parts of their observations. Until we have an agent on the ground, though, to confirm this information, we're treating it as being unconfirmed."

"Yes, of course, but still, if it is true....", Avellar stated softly.

"Then it would be a major shift in established policy for the region, Mister President", Stephen agreed. "The slave trade is a major source of income on Antallos. Even in the Draconis Combine, while publicly outlawed, it's still a lively trade. Having a new power in the region making it illegal is a signal to all others who're involved in it."

"Especially when the power that does is in control of the only spaceport on world. The slave traders will have to find another place to do business", Avellar noted.

"One of my analysts called it a 'Hearts and Mind' campaign, if true", Stephen went on. "Show the masses that you're different to their usual rulers. Help them, even a little and they'll be yours. So far, it seems that they're holding to it, rigorously."

Neil Avellar turned his chair around, his eyes looking through the window at his left, gazing at the clouds as they drifted past, his mind churning with this news. Stephen waited patiently for a sign to continue his briefing, again wishing he had the resources to do a more thorough job of investigating. Most of his people were tasked with keeping an eye on the Combine, which, truly, was a joke. It'd be easier to check how many people were NOT actually ISF agents, he morosely thought. Combined with their limited funding, as part of the Alliance Service Arm, they'd be lucky to mount any kind of effective operation, even on their own soil. On foreign soil? Apart

from an operative in the few Alliance embassies in the inner sphere, that was nothing more than a fantasy. Whatever information they managed to gather from outside their borders was due to the goodwill of their own citizens sending the information to them.

"What else", Neil Avellar asked as he turned back around, arms folded across his desk, his gaze squarely on his head of intelligence.

"Mister President, it seems that the invasion of Port Krin is only part of their agenda", Stephen said, as he went through the briefing materials.

"In June, a dropship entered orbit over the world of Rudolpho, claiming to be representatives of a company called John Deere", he continued.

"Claiming? Did they attack and if so, why was I not informed", Avellar asked, eyes narrowed.

"Mister President, there was no attack", Stephen stated. "According to governor Islington, the representative and his people showed off farming equipment, manufactured by the facilities onboard the dropship", Stephen handed over a brochure, the colors and yellow and bright green prominently displayed, "with participation of some of the farmers themselves. The governor reports that enthusiasm among the farmers was great enough that he placed an initial order for several of these vehicles called tractors, with attachments, to be delivered immediately. A further, much larger order was placed, to be fulfilled once their factory is fully up and running. Several other Alliance worlds were visited, where again, they received orders for immediate delivery as well as follow-on orders. Governor Islington received word recently that the second order is being shipped, from their manufacturing facility in the Free Worlds League. Payment is to be made upon delivery. I have the payment and corporate details here", Stephen said, handing the president a sheet of paper.

Avellar took it, frowning as he read through the information in front of him.

John Deere & Company, Agromech & Tractor Division

For product demonstrations, sales and after-sales service and warranty information, please contact our Sales Department in Port Krin, Antallos.

"You think this was a reconnaissance mission, using the guise of traders", Avellar asked.

"Yes, Mister President. The timing is too coincidental to be a coincidence", Rios-Rivera affirmed.

"Could this be the precursor to an invasion of the Alliance", the president asked, a slight worry settling around him.

"Uncertain at this point, Mister President", Rios-Rivera noted. "They used multiple jump- and attendant dropships to take Port Krin. Again, according to our sources, these were the same vessels the previous Administrator employed to sent his task force", Stephen explained, disdain coloring his voice, "to invade this CSN. That would suggest that they not only defeated the pirates but also captured all of their jump- and dropships. Using their own vessels could have given the Administrator of Port Krin warning. This way, they've got the tactical advantage."

"It could also imply that they don't have their own jumpships, or at least have very few of them", Avellar noted.

"Maybe, but without further information, we can't say for certain. Best to err on the side of caution, Mister President."

Avellar sat back in his chair, his eyes traveling back to the piece of paper with the company's information on it.

"Recommendations, Director", Avellar asked.

"Diplomatic contact", Stephen said without hesitation.

"Why", Avellar wanted to know.

"They are interested in us, judging from their sending a covert mission into our territory BEFORE their invasion of Port Krin", Rios-

Rivera noted. "They sold us equipment we didn't know we needed. The Combine and Federated Suns seem to be courting them, yet they are already trading with us. Why, Mister President? We need answers to those questions. The Agency does not have the capability to investigate this. Not without serious backing."

"And the best way to do that, would be to have a diplomatic envoy stationed in Port Krin, with their staff", Avellar questioned.

"Yes, Mister President", Rios-Rivera agreed. "I could maybe assign one or two agents to any diplomatic staff you deem fit to send."

"What about analysis, Stephen? Like you said, the agency is understaffed and under-funded", President Avellar noted.

"For now, we can handle it, Mister President. Most of the information is nothing more than rumor or supposition. In time, I'll have to limit the number of people we have following up on the Combine's activities within our borders, though."

"Very subtle, Stephen", Avellar said laughingly. "I'll see if I can shake some extra funding loose for the agency, provided you can find the right people. In the meantime, thank you, Stephen."

The director got up at his dismissal, standing at attention for a moment, before turning and walking out the door.

Chambers of the Parliament Alpheratz, Outworlds Alliance, Periphery May 20, 2007/3022

"Representatives, you've all read the report presented by Director Rios-Rivera. You've read my proposal to send a delegation to Antallos with the hopes of opening up diplomatic relations with this new entity. What say you", President Neil Avellar asked of the four people sitting around the large table in Parliament House.

"Highly irregular, is my first thought", Andrea Stavrou stated. Stavrou

was the oldest person in the room, having served his world as a member of parliament for the last twelve years, been governor of his world for half that time and sitting at this table for the last two. He had served the Alliance in one way or another almost his entire life, starting out in the militia's armor regiment, serving for more than a decade before returning to civilian life and the family's myriad business holdings, only to somehow become embroiled into an election for representative and winning.

"Instead of sending an official request to the Foreign Ministry to establish relations, this CSN apparently uses a commercial enterprise as cover to gain intelligence on our nation", Stavrou stated.

"If they truly are on an intelligence gathering mission, wouldn't they be keeping to Alliance Space? The worlds they've been to, apart from their mainly agricultural significance, aren't really that vital to military security. The same can be said for the few Free Worlds' planets they visited", Colin Mallory stated.

"Maybe, but coming back to deliver the purchased equipment does give them access to more of our space. Before long, they'll be a known sight across Alliance territory. People talk", Stavrou replied.

"This CSN seems powerful, as evidenced by their military arm. They come out of nowhere. They have technology that seems to come straight from legend. Coupled with this report, I'd be a fool not to think they want something from us. It may be trade, it may be something else, but without further information...", Merrick Suleiman trailed off.

"Reports from Antallos so far, are positive. They've abolished slavery, are cracking down on crime, even if perpetrated by their own. Medical help, education, construction and reconstruction are highly prioritized, using mainly locals. They seem genuine in their help. They are also on friendly terms with both the Dragon and the Suns", Suleiman continued.

"And that is what bothers you", Stavrou stated.

"Yes, Andrea. They sound too good to be true", Suleiman replied.

"We don't really have a choice, do we", Jorgen Ferreira asked rhetorically. "The CSN wants something from the Alliance, be it political or trade. I doubt it is to sell these ... these 'tractors and related equipment', no matter how useful they will be to our farmers IF the promised numbers are delivered. We need to know what that is, but just as important, we need to establish contact with them because we are neighbors."

Everybody in the room understood what was not being said by Ferreira. The Combine as a neighbor, while bringing in much needed revenue, could at any time decide that the Alliance would be better off under their control, the moment it believed that the Alliance had violated its neutrality.

A new neighbor, one friendly towards the Alliance, willing to trade and on good terms with both the Federated Suns and the Draconis Combine and with an enviable reputation in combat against overwhelming odds? That was something the Alliance needed to bolster itself against the Kuritans.

President Neil Avellar sat quietly, watching the four people representing the whole of the Alliance go back and forth. There was never any question that the Alliance wouldn't try and contact this new player. It was a gamble, pure and simple, but here, today, it was all they had left. The Alliance was on its last legs, getting by by the skin of its teeth. Production of goods kept going down, no matter what they did. Transport capacity was limited, education even with help from the Federated Suns was not nearly universal enough.

The Alliance was a shadow of it's former self and the people blamed his family for it all. It didn't matter that the myriad wars were responsible for most of it, or that the dearth of knowledge, replacement parts and equipment had a significant impact. No, the Avellar family had lead them here, to this dreary existence. Win or lose, this was probably the last chance to pull his people up or destroy them with his good intentions.

"Representatives, we shall put this to a vote. All those in favor of sending an official delegation to Antallos to meet with the designated

representatives of the CSN and request formal diplomatic relations...."

Moscow, Russia
Earth, Sol III
Coalition of Sovereign Nations
Grantville Cluster
9th January 2008/3023

Timofey, bundled in his winter clothing, turned his five year old BMW into the familiar underground car park. It was almost full but he managed to find a spot thanks to the security man sitting there, wearing a mountain of clothing warding off the cold, watching the monitors, and politely pointing out where the parking spaces were. After parking he took out the supplies from the boot, set the car alarm and walked towards the lifts. Now surrounded by chrome, mirrors, and heated air, Timofey removed his thick wool hat, scarf, and gloves, and rode up to the twelfth floor. He honestly didn't understand why Grandfather didn't get the Penthouse. He honestly deserved it, but it had taken Timofey's father and all his Aunt's powers of persuasion to convince Grandpa just to move into one of the new modern apartment complexes on the banks of the River Moscow. Timofey well remembered the previous Khrushchev-style block Dedushka had lived in and shuddered at memories of the shriveled courtyards, ill-maintained facilities and non-functional lifts.

The lift stopped and he emerged on his destination floor into a large hall extending all the way down to his destination. Timofey wished that the other owners of these apartments would've had the foresight to properly budget when they had bought them, for the other two apartments on the floor's doors were missing, and beyond them you could see the darkened interiors of unfinished living spaces. He headed to the only proper door; this one was thick, hardened polished oak. Timofey fumbled with the keys and entered the hundred and fifty square meters of space that belonged to a Hero of the Russian Federation.

Timofey was at once intercepted by an excited, yet demanding bundle of energy, wrapped in warm, colorful clothes. "Uncle Timmy!" One of his youngest cousins promptly had her arms wrapped around his waist and was giving him one of those damnable cute expressions. He sighed, wondering if there was ever a time that he had possessed

that much youthful energy, and reached into the bag of supplies. Little Nadia eagerly accepted the candy and the die-cast toys, before promptly vanishing into the bowels of the apartment.

He pulled off his jacket, hanging it up, and walked through the main hallway, passing framed family photos and various others. Distinctive by the fact that they were grainy black and white, mostly featuring a T34 tank, with its crew perched on top in various locations, the last of which was near Brody. His eyes always found the commander of the tank and were somewhat amazed at how similar he looked to that young sergeant of the 24th Tank Regiment.

Timofey stopped outside a door at the end of the hallway, this one all the family knew never to enter unless Granddad said it was okay or he was with them. Timofey knocked. "Dedushka?"

"Come in, Timo."

He opened the door and entered his Grandfather's study and workspace. It was usually an orderly space, with polished parquet floors, patterned rugs, portraits on the wall, a bookcase dominating one whole side of the room, and a polished desk in the centre, with a large drawing and technical planning board on the other side. It also had a beautiful view over the River, especially at night, through a large window behind the desk. Now though, heavy emerald curtains covered the windows, all the portraits had been taken down, replaced with all sorts of schematics of various oddly shaped components stuck to the walls with cello tape, the floor was littered with crumpled paper and an overflowing waste basket, the desk was crowded with open books and a laptop perched dangerously on the edge of it. Timofey rushed forward and rescued it from potential disaster.

"Timo, have a look at that blasted thing, will you? I pressed a wrong button and it threw me out," Granddad grumbled from his perch at the drawing board, moving the large integrated ruler and carefully drawing a long line on the large A1 design sheet with a pencil that was nearing the end of its useful life.

Timofey held up the shopping bags. "I brought you more pencils,

drawing supplies and...your favorite brand of vodka."

"Ah, thanks a lot, Timo. Just put it down next to the desk." He did as the old General bid and picked up the laptop, pulling another chair closer and sat down next to him. Timofey tapped a key on the laptop; the screensaver vanished and asked for his twelve digit password. He entered it and now it asked for his GDI ID and authorization code. The final step it asked for was to place his thumb on the fingerprint scanner. It flashed *'Authorization Accepted. Captain Timofey Alexandrey Kalashnikov. GDI Army.'*

The helpful interface automatically went back to the last screen it had displayed, a long list of various alloys, their compositions, various stress characteristics and performance figures at various temperatures, a link at each alloy allowed you to go to another screen and get detailed *'how to make'* instructions. Timofey looked up at what Granddad was working on now and frowned in frustration, wishing he had the level of technical acumen to simply look at a diagram and know instantly what it was and what it did. The General did say it would come with more time and experience under his belt, and that he should try to do things without a CAD program more often.

He watched the age old process of design with pencil, rule and paper for a while before his eyes ranged down to the laptop and he opened a new window and began browsing the Snowflake database for the tank designs once used by the Star League.

The current Cosmos was a bare one for the Tanker and that instrument of warfare had suffered throughout the various Succession Wars. During the Star League both Mech and Tank had stood side by side, especially within the Terran Hegemony Combined Arms philosophy. After the fall of the League and the cataclysm that followed, the factories producing parts were bombed and even nuked out of existence. The logistically more intensive and less flexible Tank had to be discarded. Commanders ordered them stripped of their weaponry and armor, to be placed on damaged Mechs which could move over any hostile terrain with much more ease than any tracked or wheeled vehicle.

In this new reality of war, the Mech surged to prominence and as the generations passed the Tank fell into disuse. Men began to identify with the Battlemech, even anthropomorphize it. It became their livelihood: it became part of their culture. It was survival. Then, when even the Mech factories started to burn in the fires of war, they became even more valuable. The days of entire companies and regiments of the Mech fighting each other were a thing of the past. The fates of entire worlds were now in the hands of mere Lances of Mechwarriors. The mystique of one-on-one personal combat between men only added to the allure of the Battlemech.

The Tank refused to die though. Timo knew that now the Tank was experiencing a resurgence of minor sorts in the Lyran Commonwealth as Mechs became scarcer and they were reaching the point where the still existing manufacturers couldn't keep up with the widespread demand. The Tank was much more mechanically simple and easier to make than a bipedal mech, after all. But this practical simplicity was fighting an uphill battle against the prejudice and bias of men, who when told of an incoming enemy first asked 'Where's our Mechs?'

He inwardly laughed again as he remembered his Granddad's derision of the Mech, especially at the news that the GDI had started its own homegrown Mech programs.

"Well, at least we're selling most of them off to the Inner Sphere, that'll keep those feuding fools stuck in their endless jousts while we get on with the real business." The General also grumbled a bit when he saw the specifications of the Commonwealth's Rommel Tank. *"Very nice, but they could've chosen a better name for the thing."*

Timofey looked up and was startled to see that the General had almost finished his design. Had he been in the Snowflake program for so long? Or was it just that his Granddad could draw quickly?

"Almost done, I think," muttered the General, staring at the design with a critical eye. Timofey looked at it, absorbing the details, and watched as his Granddad nodded at it and wrote '*Avtomat Kalashnikova-08*' on the bottom corner. It was an automatic gas-operated, short-stroke piston design rifle chambering a new 6.5mmx54mm Armor Piercing round, but modified to be rimless,

with thirty of them housed in a sturdy magazine. He stared at the bullet diagram and noticed that it featured a Nickel-Iron penetrator core.

"Why Ni-Fe, Granddad?"

"Cheapest and easiest penetrator to make in bulk, and will go through even the toughest body armor that House Armies wear, given their performance characteristics."

"Earthbound Nickel stocks will quickly run dry...though with the asteroid mining currently happening that's not a long-term problem." Timofey continued his scrutiny; noting the twenty round curved magazine. That alone would require a paradigm shift by both soldiers and quartermasters. The previous thinking on Earth, given body armor performance, had made the 5.56 caliber ideal; allowing a large number of rounds to be carried that had increased a soldier's combat endurance, and was able to penetrate most forms of body armors of the time. Now with the sudden jump in body armor performance of Earth's potential enemies out in the cosmos, a soldier had to be given a round that could go through that armor and kill reliably. This meant a bigger round and conversely a soldier carrying heavier ammunition and less of it than before, in other words, combat endurance would have to take a reduction, unless the GDI military exoskeleton project in Texas was successful. That would allow a soldier to carry even more ammunition than he could have with the 5.56 rounds.

Timofey noted the alloys and the number of similarities to the AK action, such as the large dust cover, iron sights and lever safety selector, but also the upper and underside rails running the length of the weapon for easy attachment of various scopes, and under-slung grenade launchers, shotgun, or other pieces of equipment. The he noticed something else. "You're not venting propellant gas into the receiver."

"Yes, my friends at HK have determined that doing so deposits carbon fouling onto the bolt mechanism over time."

"It's...an excellent design, Granddad, though it's not exactly..."

Timofey cut himself off abruptly.

"What? High tech?" the General harrumphed. "You think we're at the point where we can make a man-portable and reliable Rail gun or Gauss Rifle? Let alone that Star League Mauser 960 Laser rifle? Those are ten, maybe twenty years down the line...things I will not live to see, Grandson. This weapon is something that can go into production NOW, and will give the troops defending the motherland...sorry, the motherworld something to fight with, should that thrice cursed Draconis Combine come calling."

"We're aiming to stay on their good side, Dedushka."

"So did Stalin try to do the same with Hitler, and we saw how well that went. No, my grandson, it's only a matter of time...they're practically a bunch of interstellar Shogunates, united only by force, fear, and ideals of Bushido that they ignore when it's convenient. The amount of control that Coordinator of theirs has over their military is too flimsy for my liking as well. We should not be so rosy about the Federated Suns either. Davion is a monarch when all is said and done, he can decide on a mere whim that he would prefer us under his 'protection'. And let's not forget the Periphery nations...they're fair weather allies at best." Granddad promptly lifted the design paper up and let it settle behind the design board. Timofey was surprised to see another half-finished theoretical design. He had clearly been busy while he been to the shops. "This should satisfy you more."

Timofey grinned at it with excitement. "A practical caseless rifle?"

"Based on the TK Assault that the Buron Cavalry has, I'm still working on getting the reliability issues sorted out. I want you to be able to bury this thing like the AK47 or the AK8 for that matter, and still allow it to work after a good cleaning."

The he noticed another significant detail of the provisionally named 'AK09'. "Polygonal rifling?"

"Yes, I've told HK that they must get their researchers working on this again. It produces superior speed and accuracy, though its cost was

the previous stumbling block that stopped it. I think with the projected economics of the future that will be overcome."

That sheet was also turned over and now Timofey saw his Grandfather had gotten to the good stuff. It was provisionally called the 'HK312' and was a theoretical design for a man portable Gauss Rifle. This design hadn't been done by the General, but was a printed one sent over from H&K. They had asked for his insight into the mechanical aspect and to put his unique touch onto the design. There were still a lot of blanks to fill in, a small, sufficient, reliable power supply, and switching speed of the internal coils, but the basic mechanical design was there. There was also another version that used Rail Gun principles. Already there were numerous scribbles and arrows on it made by the General's pencil.

"The recoil on these will be frightful," he pointed out the calculations on the page.

"Which is why only Powered Armor and Battle Armor troops will be able to safely use them."

"If that's the case, then it also solves the power problem, since you can run the weapon off the PAs supply."

Grandpa nodded in agreement with the idea, "I'll send that suggestion to them. If both armor and weapon can be made to run off the same power supply and keep the combat endurance roughly the same, it'll save on weight in the weapon."

"Dedushka, you know that some people are going to object to the caliber you're using in the AK eight."

"Of course they are," the General agreed readily. "The soldiers will moan about the extra weight right until the AK eight keeps reliably penetrating the myriad of body armors out there. The Quartermasters will curse at the increased complexity in keeping their stores stocked with another ammo type. The accountants will complain at the cost. Bah, a gun is a gun, and we need one that can do the job out there. Remember," Lieutenant General Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalasknikov poked his fingers pointedly into his grandson's shoulder, "Anything

that is useful is simple."

"Yes, Dedushka."

Office of Extraterrestrial Surveys and Assays
Washington DC, Earth, Grantville Cluster
17 Feb 2007

The building that housed the OESA was an annex donated to the National Geographic Society by the United States Government to act as a centralized headquarters and clearing house for the data and samples brought back to Earth by the three active extrasolar survey teams. Students from the nearby George Washington University volunteered their time (for the ample reward of practical job experience and credits) to help sort out and index the mountains of information that came every few weeks as the *Emerald City* made its route from Sol to the three active survey worlds.

Officially, the OESA was operated by the Coalition, who supplied the Jumpship and Dropships used by the Office. However, the unofficial handshake deal was that as long as the OESA didn't do anything criminal or stupid, they would be allowed to set their own goals and timetables. So far it had worked out pretty well for all involved.

Two men were sitting in a cramped office on the third floor of the building, one barely larger than a broom closet. They were going over the latest transmitted reports from the *Emerald* which was currently in-system to transfer supplies to and from the Survey Groups.

Doctor Fungai Ochieng was from South Africa, doing work for the NGS when the call came out for people to staff the new organization. He had replied and somehow fallen into being head of the Xenobiology department when, on his first day in D.C., he had simply taken charge of the chaos he was assigned to. The next day, he had come in again to find his name on a nameplate and a larger paycheck than he was expecting. "I would have really thought that Oz would be the first settled, given that it's better for settlement than... Úfric... was it? Now all the plans have been shelved for five to ten years."

"Úlfur actually. It's Icelandic." Dr. Lief Johansson came from Iceland and was head of the Xenogeology department, making these two pretty much in charge of the entirety of the scientific depositions of

the Office. Although they did joke that one of the benefits of being in charge was that the paperwork could be delegated. Except in cases like this. "I do agree that Oz will be an excellent breadbasket world, or at least a decent colony. But with data like this coming back from Úlfur...." He let his voice train off. "It's information not in the Snowflake," He referred to the Star League Data core recovered from Columbus by the code-name of the mission that recovered it, "and there are plenty of people nervous about that."

"Bah. At least Oz and Wonderland match the Snowflake to within reasonable parameters." Fungai slipped the initial survey reports from those two words back to the top of his current pile. Oz, also known to astronomers as Tau Ceti IV, matched up with New Earth in the Inner Sphere, site of the first interstellar colony world. The Star League maps matched the curves of the continents, and information on local flora and fauna had matched up with a good accuracy.

Wonderland was the name given to the moon of the second planet of the Alpha Centauri system, more scientifically known as Rigel Kentaurus II-a. The planet around which the moon orbited was named 'Rabbithole' by the German head of the expedition to that world. Two potentially inhabitable celestial bodies in that system meant that there was a request for a second expedition, or even just an expansion to the established presence. However, the Coalition and the OESA were having some problems scrounging up the needed resources, having spent much on the first three. The star Procyon (Alpha Canis Minoris) gave rise to the world of Úlfur, which was considered a lucky find in the small habitable band around the star, despite the presence of the Procyon B. "Thankfully those systems have justified our position and existence to the Coalition. Although China and India are both petitioning for colonization rights already."

"What? Already? Gods above, do they not know that we simply don't have the capacity to move colonists at any proper rate, right? That all our available FTL ships are currently in use going to and from Antallos?" Ochieng grumbled at the not-unexpected realization that both of Earth's most heavily populated nations were pressing for new frontiers to relieve their population pressures upon. But there simply wasn't any way to move the millions upon millions required each year – and wouldn't be for at least a decade.

"Oh, I'm sure the politicians know. But they aren't playing to the Coalition with these demands, but rather to their own native populace that sees emigration to the stars as a viable choice for a better life; and they want it now, not later." Johansson didn't see the need to tell his compatriot about the far more reasonable plans being put together by the Scandinavian governments for the colonization of Úlfur – a far more long-term plan that didn't involve the construction of massive Dropships to move massive amounts of people to other stars.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid sheep."

"Hey, not everyone is as smart as the people in charge. Well, for the most part, anyway. I'm sure we can name a few dumb politicians. At least the general survey data for those two is consistent with the Snowflake." Both men had heard the rumors that the Star League Data Core that the Coalition had gotten their hands on was from the Deep Periphery world of Columbus, but the people in charge of the Core refused to say out of concern for operational security.

The CSN had told the Office to work blind to the contents of the Snowflake so that there would be no presumptions about what they should or should not find in the process of surveying the other worlds. So far, it was working out for the best. Once the first reports from Oz, Úlfur and Wonderland were returned to Earth, they were compared to the relevant data from the Core by a third party to ensure a limit to any intellectual contamination. What made Úlfur special enough that bumped it up to the forefront of these three worlds – over the other far more colonizable two was that the initial landing zone for the survey teams had pretty much hit the motherlode of valuable minerals.

"What about the specifics?" The Coalition was eager for sources of easily exploitable resources to fuel the exploding economy. More long term projects using space-based industries in the Sol system were sure to get what was needed, but they would take time to start up and become viable. In the mean time, the Coalition would take what they could get.

"There is a limit to the details, sorry to say. We know what the general exports were from these worlds, but where the resources were located are not recorded. We have to have men on the ground for that. Except for Úlfur, where they practically tripped over it within minutes."

"Well, that screws over some companies time-tables. I think that there are several mining consortiums hoping that they could start operations without the need for time consuming surveys. Or Environmental Impact Statements." Ochieng snorted. "I suppose we all expected the Snowflake to give us the answers we want, and while it does, in a way, it doesn't tell us the important bits. I keep hearing from the engineers about how it tells you how to build things like Jumpships, but doesn't tell you why they work like that, or the basic math or physical principles behind their operation." He wished for a drink to stiffen himself, but held fast against the desire. "You know, I'm beginning to suspect that the Terran Hegemony didn't really trust anyone with the basic knowledge or the ability to create their own tools that were not from their mold."

"The free flow of information is the only safeguard against tyranny. The once-chained people whose leaders at last lose their grip on information flow will soon burst with freedom and vitality, but the free nation gradually constricting its grip on public discourse has begun its rapid slide into despotism. Beware of he who would deny you access to information, for in his heart he dreams himself your master."

Ochieng stared slack-jawed at the Icelandic Geologist. "Who the hell said that?" His awe at the depth of the quote quite clear.

"Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri. A computer game. Quite appropriate, don't you think?"

**Office of Precentor Long
Port Krin, Antallos
06 March 3022**

The Precentor of Antallos looked again at the official letter delivered

to his office by Ambassador Smith personally. It was from Lord Jack Ryan himself – although the leader of the CSN apparently felt that holding the title of 'President' was less ostentatious and more appropriate to keeping himself in power. Well, it was not the place of Long to make such judgment calls.

He flipped through the handwritten pages, with a more official transcript attached but ignored. It was, in Long's opinion, a brilliant piece of political double-speak, on par with any of the House Lord communications that passed across his table. Jack Ryan was no stranger to the political process and the Precentor felt that some appreciation was in order. Motherlode would be well served by a leader who would be capable of navigating the political arena of the Inner Sphere.

Although the presence of the letter itself would mean that Long had to do something that he hadn't done in many years. He had gone through the massive hardbound copy of the official policies and procedures issued to all HPG stations. The origin of this tome could be traced back to the Blessed Blake himself as a means to assure that all the HPG stations were held to the same laws and rules. Normally communications sent to ComStar itself were made at an HPG station and transmitted to Terra (for the minimum price of course). Having a physical letter delivered to the local Precentor was not without precedent, but over the past couple of centuries, the modern method had been settled into stone.

The most relevant information in the tome came from around the time of the First Succession War, when the Blessed Blake himself was still forming ComStar. Officially, a letter such as this had to be physically transported to the addressee – in this case the Primus himself at Hilton Head on Terra. Unofficially, Long could transcribe the letter and send that via HPG to the Primus while the letter itself took the slow route and wound up in the archives of ComStar, unopened.

But all that was academic in the end. No, it was the actual contents of the letter itself that would cause the biggest stir inside the halls of Hilton Head. Even here on the edge of the Periphery, he could sense the building tension inside the hallowed order about how to best deal

with this Star League remnant state.

What the letter in his hand boiled down to was that the CSN graciously and politely declined ComStar's offer to operate their HPG stations. They did not deny having them, but rather gave various and vague reasons for their decision, preferring instead to continue official communications between the two governments by HPG from Terra to Antallos and then via Command Circuit from Antallos to Motherlode (which they, the CSN, still identified as Earth in official documents).

Long knew he didn't have the mindset of ROM, but even he could see that this letter would only exacerbate the growing strain in ComStar. Between those who felt that this CSN was the long promised return of Kerensky (just hiding their true allegiance until the time was right) and those who quietly argued that no matter their origin, the CSN needed the guiding hand and leadership of ComStar and the blessed word of Blake to help protect them from the evils of the Inner Sphere.

The Precentor Antallos put down the letter in question. It would not do to act in haste, no matter what happened, or could happen. As the darkness grew, the lights of Port Krin shone ever brighter, a result of the CSN and their works. Precentor Long thought long and hard about which side he would support, should it ever come down to that.

**Office of the Precentor, HPG Station
Port Krin, Antallos
12 April, 3022**

"Ah! Welcome to Port Krin!" Precentor Long greeted ROM Precentor Style with a warm gesture that pushed the bounds of what was considered proper in that sort of situation. "I trust your trip from Terra was uneventful?"

Style froze slightly in the face of such a forward embrace. "It was quiet, Precentor Long. Thank you for your concern." He was released and instantly recomposed himself. Style attributed this unusual display of affection to his presence, a validation of the hard work that

Long had performed here on Antallos without hope of expectation or reward. "Although I am afraid that I must cut these pleasantries short in the favor of the reason for my official business."

Long stepped back and nodded somberly. "Please do, Precentor."

Style reached into a pocket and withdrew a letter from the travel pouch. "I bring a message to you from the Primus and the First Circuit, honoring your works in the recent months as well as promoting you from Precentor VIII to Precentor XII." He passed the handwritten letter to Long who opened it with shaking hands to confirm the contents and the four-step raise in grade. Style let Long take his time as he examined the office in more detail.

He saw the large window that faced out over a large portion of Port Krin, including the Mech factory under construction in the distance. The traditional painted map of Terra adorned one wall, while the Blessed Blake gazed with infinite wisdom from his portrait on the other wall, flanked by large rows of books that contained a wide variety of subjects.

Long read the letter twice before putting it down. The elder Precentor returned to his desk and sat down, inviting Style to do the same. His face was an unreadable mask, even to the experienced ROM agent. "Thank you" he said without trace of emotion. Style felt that Long was simply in shock and that he would take a little time to work his way into the joy he truly felt. "How long will the upgrades last, if I may ask?"

Style already had a timetable available to him. "About a month, barring unexpected delays. The local GDI contingent has been offering to help, but in all honesty, there is not much they can offer." Style noted that he could see a bit of the spaceport to one side of the window behind Long. A GDI marked Dropship was taking off for destinations unknown to him at this time.

"That may be, but they are very smart, Precentor Style. Please do not underestimate them." Long warned as he noticed Style's moment of inattention to himself.

Style corrected that without being aware of the problem that Long saw. "Oh, we won't. In fact, we already have leads on a few of their spies already in the Inner Sphere." Style was proud of his fellows in ROM in already getting a handle on this upstart State. And soon they would be brought to heel as everyone should be before ComStar.

"Ah." Long changed the subject as he stood up. "Well then, perhaps I should give you a tour? You can pick which office you want. As long as it's not mine." Long cracked a small smile at his joke, which Style mirrored.

Office of the Precentor, HPG station
Port Krin, Antallos
29 April, 3022

"Again?!?" The Adept responsible for the security upgrades for the Precentor's office nearly threw the mobile terminal to the floor in frustration. "It has to be an internal error. A TAG alert on the Precentor's window?"

The other adept simply shrugged. "I wouldn't know, sir. Only TAG gear I've seen was back on Terra." She looked out the window. "And I don't see any ComGuard Mechs out there pointed our way. Nor any GDI ones."

"Well, if we don't get this fixed by the end of the day, I'll have to disable the warning, flagging it as a hardware error due to improper storage. That's the only explanation."

ROM Analysis Room, HPG Station
Port Krin, Antallos
01 May 3022

Mulligan Fox walked through the double-soundproofed doorways into the inner sanctum of the ROM contingent here on Antallos. He had his head down, reading the latest in intercepted transmissions from the GDI. Apparently, their lostech ability to hide radio signals didn't extend to the handheld units carried by their infantry. Often

their transmissions were made in the open, but using codewords mixed in with normal English.

There was a dedicated group of three people cracking the codewords based on context, and they were doing well enough to be proud of their work, at least, in their own minds. Even if they couldn't yet listen in on the military communications, hearing the reports from their civilian contractors and other people they brought in from Motherlode with non-lostech equipment was revealing. For all this though, it was still their civilian gear that Comstar could listen in on. Their military encryptions were all but noise in the background as far as his people could figure out.

For example, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or 'Mounties' for short. They were a civilian police force, that much was public knowledge. Canada was a nation-state on Terra before the days of the Terran Alliance and such an organization did exist. But why the call-back to an organization centuries dead? The current theory was that this organization was part of Kerensky's Fleet that was from Canada and that they took the name as their own when they settled on Motherlode. Of course, given the causal name of the 'Mounties', ROM wondered what they were mounted on. Their predecessor organization used horses for controlling the wide stretches of wilderness, so they believed that they used some sort of APC or 'Mech for such work now.

There had been a small inquiry made into what kinds of Mechs would be ideally suited for such work, and the first response back was *Firestarter*, used for crowd control. Fox read that person the riot act for not taking this seriously - military forces would use the lethal force of mech-scale flamers, not police. The offending researcher had countered that it wasn't the use, but the threat implied with the Flamers that would make for good anti-riot work. In addition, the Machine Guns could be adapted to fire non-lethal rounds while another person spoke up about some experiments in adapting flamers to fire a gooey substance to hinder infantry.

Mulligan had recanted his accusations of incompetency and replaced it with a reprimand for supplying incomplete information in a report.

And was that laughter? The Adept raised his head and looked around, seeking the source of the sound. He found it behind a closed partition which he quietly slid open. Peeking his head in, he saw that there were about a dozen members of his group lounging around, laughing and making jokes while writing on a whiteboard that took up most of one wall. He saw a long list of names that all had one thing in common - they could all represent the acronym of C. S. N.

Two were circled, obviously the most reasonable guesses. The first was the *Commonwealth Star Nation* (with the word *Cameron* written underneath with a question mark attached to it) while the second was for the *Cameron Star Navy*. The rest were obvious jokes and puns that gave Adept Fox pause to compose himself before he opened the door with a bit more force than normal. "While I don't mind some of those jokes on the board, I really hope you don't expect me to tell them to the First Circuit in my next report." His stern voice carried well into the room.

His sudden presence caused a huge stir in the room. Were they real field agents, they would have known he was coming and would certainly have not allowed him to see the indecent suggestions. After a minute of amazingly constructive panic, the whiteboard had been almost totally cleaned while many excess analysts had quietly filed out past him. "Now, can someone explain those two, and why?" Fox pointed at the two circled suggestions.

Fear, he mused, was a wonderful motivator, especially when it wasn't implied, just assumed.

"Ah, you see..." the man by the whiteboard said, not introducing himself while Mulligan couldn't remember his name, "...you see we only had two proper suggestions. The first is the *Commonwealth Star Nation*. Now, this is based on the idea that Motherlode was a Terran Hegemony Deep Periphery colony. One of our men remembered that when the Terran Alliance became the Terran Hegemony, various other names were bandied about. That included calling the new nation the Terran Commonwealth. It is possible that the Motherlode colonists used that name in remembrance of their predecessor nation. There is some possible justification in when the House Steiner named their State the Lyran Commonwealth. Similar reasons, different sides

of the Sphere."

Fox nodded. "And the other one?"

"The *Cameron Star Navy* reflects the current majority theory that the CSN is the remnant of the Kerensky's forces. Naturally even if they couldn't be obvious about their allegiance to the fallen Star League, they could not simply abandon it. Hence the use of the acronym, rather than the full name in all available intercepted documentation."

"Oh?" Mulligan tilted his head. He could see that was a lame justification and let it show. "What about the Global Defense Initiative then? How does that fit?"

"Global is another word for Sphere. Inner Sphere." The man countered. He was completely certain of that and the head of the CSN branch of ROM didn't object immediately. "Probably a force reorganization put the Jump and Warships of Kerensky's fleet ahead of the mechwarriors. We have already compiled a list of all known and probable ships that left with him after the Coup. Including upwards of a dozen McKenna class WarShips."

GDI Salvage Expedition

Somewhere in the Desert, Antallos

01 May, 3022

Remus walked the *Industrial Mech* back to its berth, where the GDI training cadre were waiting for him. They had plenty of recruits, so they convinced Bob to let them hire out Remus and his 'mech to train their new engineers. The wads of cash made for a persuasive argument now that Bob's mistress was expecting a child in the next couple months.

With smooth efficiency, Remus spun the mech around and gently backed into the temporary berth where the magnetic clamps snapped into place, holding his mech still as he shut down the ICE. Popping the canopy, he took the hand of one of the mechs, seeing again the CSN flag over the GDI's Eagle.

"Hey, dumb question, but this has really been annoying me." Remus spoke as he looked into the eyes of the man who helped him out of the mech. "I was told what GDI means, but what does CSN mean, anyways?"

"Oh? That? We're the Coalition of Sovereign Nations. Why?"

"The Coalition, huh? Interesting. Just wanted to know. Thanks." Remus didn't voice the immediate question. Nations? Plural? What was really going on here?

"You're welcome." Unaware of the total nature of what was just said, the GDI tech jumped into the cockpit to do tests on the systems installed, leaving the Wolfnet agent to begin the internal debate about how best to proceed with this new information.

120km outside Freeport
Helm, Free Worlds League
02 June 3022

"How's the door coming along?" Alexander, the XO of Tomb Raider leaned up against the edifice in question. The door was well camouflaged from external surveillance, even from orbit. So much history lay hidden behind them, that it felt almost sacrilegious to break and enter. Even so, Alexander reminded himself that the Grey Death Legion was due to form and arrive here within a few years to open it up and distribute the knowledge across the Inner Sphere.

They were just speeding things up a little. That's all. After Earth got first crack at the secrets that lay within of course. And the physical technology. Having access to Star League era technology alone would give them a foot up over the rest of the Inner Sphere without revealing just how far ahead they really were. Or weren't.

As he mulled over that, he recognized that there were huge problems with that scenario; details on politics that escaped him. With a sigh, he returned his attention to the Canadian currently hacking the door with a laptop. Jason was cracking his knuckles as he considered his response, apparently not noticing the slight distraction that came

from his superior.

"Ah, well, there's supposed to be some sort of 'Key' that is in the hands of the Lord of Helm, but that person isn't on world. So right now, I'm just setting up a basic crack. The hardware connections are in place, " he indicated where some wires went from the back of his computer to a keypad that had its cover removed, "now I'm just getting the two systems to talk to each other. That's where the hard part is. The programming code used in military Star League computers is different from the stuff used in civilian code." The Canadian swung around in his chair to face the running computer screen. "And it's taking a while. Biggest issue is that we've moved to object oriented programming for our computers while the Star League never really seemed to move past procedural programming. It's like it was written in the bastard child of BASIC and C! I think it has something to do with the hardware. This Neural Net computer technology can better handle the RAM requirements of that style of language that our technology can't."

Alexander nodded. "We're in no rush. The Samurai wants the factory to be well established before we even think about beginning to smuggle technology off Helm. You want some coffee?"

Jason shook his head. "Nah, I'm a tea person myself." He looked around at the tent the two men were currently in, watching the walls flap in the wind. "I hear from the other guys that the factory is going to be in a backlog for a couple months as they bring production up. Too much to do before we get an off-site backup installed there."

Alexander nodded. "We aren't going to be installing any servers or wireless until we get a handle on what's inside this place. No need to jump ahead of ourselves."

The Canadian agreed. "Yea. I can see that. Sorry, just getting a little excited about all this, you know? I mean, sure, the Grey Death Legion would eventually do this anyways, but it'll be under a massive firefight." He shook his head sadly. "But then again, our itinerary doesn't involve being here when that happens, hopefully."

"Not to mention the Grey Death's haven't been formed yet. They're

still Carlyle's Commandos. And on the Lyran – Combine border."

"Hey wait. I remember reading that. Wasn't that the general area that Redjack Ryan came from? He did kinda tear across the Combine to attack Antallos, so that leaves a huge hole in the region."

The Tomb Raider XO thought about that. "I can where you're coming from. However, I have to remind you that the destruction of the Commandoes was politically motivated, not in combat with pirates. There is no reason to assume that our presence will cause any changes there."

"We've already caused changes a plenty, sir. The Butterfly has to make itself known somewhere and somehow. We can't depend on the source material forever. It's suicide."

120km Outside Freeport
Helm, Free Worlds League
03 June 3022

"It wasn't?" The Samurai's tone of voice did not betray his annoyance at discovering the entrance they thought led to the Star League Cache was not. Instead, it led to an empty storage facility that had all the hallmarks of a glorified cabin in the woods. No one was happy with this development as they were all back at square one.

There were no excuses. Just acceptance that they had erred. The question had led to a long discussion about where they had gone wrong with their methods and techniques. It ended with the resolution to keep looking as the Cache was too important to let a false start or three get in the way.

John Deere Agromech and Tractor Factory
Helm, Free Worlds League
01 July 3022

Daniel crinked his neck as he continued to shuffle paperwork around on his desk. While normally today would be tax day, for some reason the local Landholder's Representative, Haarlan Elin, was

forced by his Lord on Stewart to collect taxes semi-annually rather than on a more sane annual basis. Elin and Daniel had struck up a nice casual working relationship as the Helm native helped the Tomb Raider executive navigate the complexities of local laws.

But due to their recent startup, it was decided by the Office of the Landholder to give them a pass until the next tax time. Of course, that just meant an extra six months of paperwork to accrue first. It had been a hectic few weeks as he and the Tomb Raiders that were tasked to help him while the people doing the searching for the Star League cache ran into a couple dead ends.

They had covertly inserted a satellite into orbit with a ground-penetrating radar array. It was slowly surveying the world, looking for the regularities of human construction where maps indicated there were none – a secured room in the factory that was being used for comparison purposes was known as the Assays Room, the cover being a search for local resources to feed the machines that made the agricultural equipment.

It was slow going, with both found locations being dead-ends. One was an empty storehouse that was mistaken for an elevator shaft, while the other turned out to be, as he was told by an exasperated Intel agent, the equivalent of a cabin out in the woods

Normally, Daniel would have been kept out of the loop. He was still a civilian on an Intel Op, whose job was to maintain the cover for the people who were doing the job, but the long trip out to Helm had seen a high degree of socialization between everyone, and sometimes it seemed like he had been promoted from Civilian to 'Specialist New Meat'.

At least he wasn't the one getting drinks for everyone.

He had kept the previous administration's secretary around as she had displayed a remarkable competency. And could brew a mean cup of tea which she had no problems doing for someone who let her keep her job without demanding any extras. When the Tomb Raider people had found out about that particular facet of the personality of the previous owner, about half of them called in sick that day and came

back to work the next all feeling quite well.

Daniel didn't ask. Didn't want to. Didn't need to either. Different planet, different era, same scum.

At least business was booming. Shipments around the world helped pay for the shipments off world as well. Apparently their Jumpship was going to go back to New Dallas and report on the (lack of) progress in finding the Cache, and for the ND team to not wait on them. And to deliver a shipment of his produce to the locals to help build bridges and trust with them. It was a long travel loop that included Terra itself.

When the order from ComStar had come in for a wide sampling of products, the leaders of the team had gone into panic mode looking for any possible leaks or errors in thier operation, ready to pull out if it got that bad. The idea of ROM coming for them so far from support was enough justification to plan for an emergency trip to Solaris VII where they would try to vanish into the population of the open planet.

As it turned out, according to Elin, that ComStar usually places small orders from new companies, especially ones that don't produce BattleMechs as a means of putting C-Bills back into circulation and to provide some startup funds for straining economies. Which, apparently, Helm and the Factory qualified for.

After some heated discussion, it was decided that it would simply be better to act like nothing was out of the ordinary, and send the requested delivery by a different Jumpship than the one Tomb Raider was using.

Non-Standard Jumpoint New Dallas System 14 August 3022

With an electromagnetic snap, the CSN dropship appeared far from the forgotten star. A Radio message was sent inwards, expected to arrive at New Dallas proper in a few hours while a single dropship

undocked and the Jumpship unfurled its sail, secure in the knowledge that this location was still secret from the Inner Sphere.

Star League Facility
New Dallas, New Dallas System
21 August 3022

Wayne and Alexander walked side by side through a few of the seemingly endless and empty corridors inside the Star League facility. The Colonel based on New Dallas and the Tomb Raider Captain weren't just doing this for the exercise, but also to seek some privacy for some discussions best left unheard, and to patrol these outer reaches for casual looters.

The looting was a small problem they couldn't really get rid of, nor oddly enough, did they want too. In order to help refurbish the facility to working order, the GDI contingent had hired a great many of the locals – and they just couldn't help themselves to a souvenir or two for their efforts. Most of it was small or innocuous, like the man who tried to sneak out a full set of cutlery marked with the Star of Cameron for his family to use. Rarely though, someone would try to get something valuable, or dangerous. Like the young man who thought that a Laser Rifle would make a good weapon to kill rodents on his father's farm.

"Well, the Legion is due to find it in five, six years in the first place, if the Source Material is to be beleived. And they had. Will have a map. We just can't expect to just walk right up to it, or else it would have been found by now." Wayne spoke up as they turned a corner, noting the dust off their path was undisturbed. "Although were were expecting you guys sooner."

"Had to take a circular route. Deliveries to make, additional passengers we picked up along the route. Usual security issues. And had to wait to make sure it was just us when we jumped into the system. Didn't want the Spheroids to get any ideas about dead systems just yet." Alexander shrugged in apology.

Wayne nodded in understanding. "Makes a bit of sense. Hell, I got

some locals raring to sign up and see the Sphere for themselves. Got any room?"

The question was asked in jest, but the response was serious.

"Actually, I can see the need for some more people to help out at Helm. We really need people on the ground checking things out."

The Colonel blinked to try and clear his head of the thoughts. "I was joking! Can you imagine the security risks that would run?"

Alexander nodded. "Oh, easilly. But I'm sure you've noticed some people who are trustworthy, and know when to keep their mouths shut, right? Maybe a few of them would like to get off world."

Wayne sighed. "You know, that's something I can't really commit to at this point. Have to think it over, and discuss it with people."

**163km outside
Helm, Free Worlds League
31 October 3022**

"So, what's this? Eight? Or Nine?" Jason glared at the door in front of them. Over the past few months, they had located several old facilities in various states of damage an disrepair. A couple of them even had signs of being nuked during the time frame of the First Sucession War, and eventually the old maps were simply thrown out as being useless outside the well-traveled roads.

"Eight." Avi was the only Isreali in Tomb Raider, a Mossad Agent who met the requirements of the mission and actively played Battletech before the Auckland Raid. He had spent the journey from Earth teaching everyone else the rules, and looking at the entertainment of the Inner Sphere for similar games.

"Lovely. And it's Haloween too. Well, let's see what we have here. Now placing bets on it being another cabin in the mountain." The Canadian tapped some commands on his laptop, feeling out the command codes for this particular door. He had plenty of experience in hacking Star League technological infrastructure gained over the

past few months, and for the most part, it was routine. "So, there's not a lot of change happening now that the FedCom is official."

"No bets." Avi replied. "And as for the Commonwealth, you forget that such treaties and alliances are not unheard of. The other States simply don't know how serious this is in the long run." He frowned. "I wonder if whoever is in charge of the CSN at the time will get invited to the wedding?"

"I don't know. What sort of present do you give to the newly wedded couple who has pretty much everything already? Oh, and door's open." The two men waited while the old hatch slowly swung open before waving their flashlights into the darkness beyond.

"Uh, better get on the horn. This one looks deep. Might need the sappers for this."

Interior, Star League Cache Helm, Free Worlds League 17 November 3022

They had found it, and the jubilation at lucky number Eight was only now beginning to die down. Only now they realized the sheer scope of the Cache. Twenty people were simply not enough to do a good job of cataloguing everything and extracting what was wanted in any reasonable length of time.

For now, the Tomb Raider personnel had settled into the officer's quarters of the Cache while debating their next course of action. While they obviously wanted to smuggle out the Core and Mechs, they first had to reactivate the fusion engine powering the base without alerting anyone – ComStar being the primary source of concern in that regard. They all admitted that the likelihood of spontaneous detection was low, but it was better for them to take it slow.

For now, an auxiliary generator had been hooked up to the computer systems and they were copying the core to a more mobile format for shipping out the next time their Jumpship arrived to make

more deliveries for the Factory.

The engineers were busy activating one of the Star League Mechs – a *Black Knight* that seemed to be a Royal version of that chassis -- as a test-run for what they would do later. That, and they just wanted something productive to do while others were comparing the inventory found in the computers with what was actually in storage.

But in all, they would take their time, and be subtle as best they could. The idea of getting people from New Dallas to help was tempting, but they could not rationalize keeping them locked up in the Cache as a security measure. That was a level they weren't going to stoop too.

Office of the Precentor ROM
HPG Station, Port Krin, Antallos
06 May 3023

Precentor Style looked up from his paperwork. Adept Fox had requested permission to personally brief him on the latest information on the GDI/CSN, and given the young man's enthusiasm, he'd decided to grant it. Sometimes, it was the little things that brought out the best performance in one's subordinates.

"Enter."

He waved Fox to the seat in front of his desk. "What do you have for me?"

"A collection of verified facts, and the secondary conclusions the profiling team has drawn from them, sir. Along with the latest reports from Terra."

"Yes, I'd read Precentor Copperfield's report on the captured imagery, along with the conclusions Adept Martin drew from the captured computing gear." Style was less than happy with that report. If accurate, that machine, while far more frail than anything in the Inner Sphere, was far more powerful than any portable computing device regularly available outside of Terra and the core worlds of Successor States. If Martin's conclusions about the mass-production of

the devices was correct, actions would have to be taken. "Continue."

"First, there are Precentor Copperfield's notes about the Charon fleet. Additionally, ComStar archives have turned up a few - very few - references that were saved from destruction during the chaos following the Amaris coup, sir. Salvaged Hegemony Intelligence files indicate that there was a project, Codename: Masada. The few references imply that it was a Brian Castle on a planetary scale."

"Masada. That sounds like someone had a fine sense of historical irony while naming it."

"Yes, sir. The files indicate that the project was intended to begin in 2700 CE, during the reign of Jonathan Cameron. However, that is all the salvaged files contained. The intended date to begin construction, and that ultimately, there would be at least one Brian World 'behind the lines' of each member state of the Star League."

"Fallback positions."

Fox nodded. "Slightly more than that, sir. The one thing the Castles Brian did not - and could not - provide was loyal manpower. This Brian World concept was intended to provide a source of troops loyal to the League and only to the League, and huge numbers of them. A full division every month."

"They'd need a population in the hundreds of millions. But we already suspect that. Where would they have obtained the seed population?"

"The recovered files hint at hiding the numbers in military casualties, sir. People who volunteered would be listed as dead in 'training accidents', border skirmishes, and anti-piracy raids. That would also explain why the build-up was begun so early and intended to take so long. You can hide almost anything if you spread it out over a century or more."

"And then compound interest takes effect. Nicely done. Lord Jonathan might have been paranoid and delusional towards the end, but that didn't preclude him from being quite cunning. While Lady

Jocasta would have been right at home with us in ComStar." Style took a moment to scan the documents Fox handed him. "These appear to break off before any action was taken."

"The remainder of the files were destroyed just prior to the taking of THI headquarters by the Usurper's troops, sir. These copies appear to have avoided destruction because they were mis-filed as non-sensitive documents. Were the file clerk responsible for that still alive, he or she probably would be shot at dawn for criminal incompetence."

Style chuckled dryly. "Indeed. Continue."

"The profiling team has taken the overheard casual comments and tried to determine additional information from them. The most important are the following." Fox cleared his throat. "One person was overheard saying that they were 'glad we're finally getting some decent fusion reactors. Maybe now we can retire those lead-cooled hunks of junk.', while a second was heard to say that once they retired, they intended to invest in 'a nice salt-water cargo ship.'" That one took us some time to reference. We believe they were referring to a nuclear salt water rocket - essentially an engine using a continuous low-grade nuclear fission explosion."

Style's eyebrows tried to crawl up his forehead to the back of his scalp. "You're certain of this?"

"That was the profiler's first reaction as well, sir. What sort of lunatics would use fission propulsion like that when fusion is available? But taken in context with the rest of the overheard conversations, it's the only meaning that makes sense. What if they don't have fusion?"

"Then there are the reports that capital missiles were used on the pirate dropships, with either fission or fusion warheads of multi-kiloton yield. That's been confirmed from several sources, including leaks from the Kuritans. Who aren't very happy with the idea."

"No sane man would be, Fox. Continue."

"There were references to pirates who were not part of the attack that incited the invasion of Antallos, Precentor. There were at least three

comments about the destruction of pirates two centuries ago, and the total astonishment at the assault by Vorax's men. Several overheard conversations implied that prior to the attack, the CSN believed themselves to be alone in the universe."

Style snorted. "If they'd received word of the fall of the Hegemony and of the horrors of the First Succession War, that's an entirely understandable error on their part."

"Yes, sir," nodded Fox. "Several of the profiling team noted that. And the perceived danger of the House Lords, along with what appears to be the widespread use of fission power on their world explains the nuclear attacks." Mulligan looked through his notes. "There was one comment that caught the attention of a profiler who'd previously worked with ROM in the Tauran Concordat, a comment about a steep rise in the price of the element thorium. The Taurans regularly use thorium-fueled breeder reactors to mass-produce Uranium-233, a fissile material that can be used quite readily in a simple gun-type nuclear bomb design." The Adept grimaced. "Gun-style weapons similar to the first nuclear weapon ever fired in anger are mechanically simple when compared to implosion devices, and are extremely easy to build, despite being highly toxic to the people doing the building. Something that appeals to the Taurans, as Lord Ian discovered during the Reunification War."

"Logical. If you're already using fission reactors, and fear an invasion, then make a virtue of your vice. Produce massive amounts of cheap and dirty bomb fuel, and blow your enemies back to hell with nuclear fireballs." Style chuckled grimly. "When word of what happened to Vorax's scum reaches the Concordat, Lord Calderon will probably send his personal congratulations to the Motherloaders, then order a celebration to be held in their honor."

Style could see the young Adept trying to repress an out-of-place (though entirely understandable) smile. "With respect, Precentor, such a celebration would not be... altogether unwarranted."

"It would be somewhat inappropriate, however. What other conclusions have your team come to?"

"The number of intercepted communications increases, but only from civilian sources. We are still unable to intercept their military communications. We know they are using radios, but..." Fox shook his head, frustrated. "Even when they are clearly transmitting in front of us, we receive nothing but static.

"Further intercepts are attached to the file, but to sum the report, the people of Motherload appear to use fission on a scale seen nowhere inside the Inner Sphere, or even in the Concordat. They speak of hundreds of fission reactors that they hope to replace with fusion engines. Their world appears to be defended in depth with capital missiles armed with high-yield fission warheads, possibly even fusion warheads. Interpreting from various side comments, their population would appear to be at least one billion or greater, and hasn't been attacked by external forces for nearly two centuries.

"Furthermore, they appear to have been expecting such an attack for some time, according to some statements. Their computer technology, while far less durable and less resistant to wear than what we are familiar with, is far more compact and lends itself well to the manufacture of smart projectiles, neatly explaining their lack of energy-based weapons. They use several languages, which may imply that they have more than one colony as part of their state, which may offer ComStar a point of leverage. And they are adamant concerning any possible take-over of their interstellar communications network by ComStar, with at least one person being overheard commenting that ComStar was no more trustworthy than Kerensky."

Style looked at him sharply. "Repeat that."

"The person overheard stated that ComStar was no more trustworthy than General Kerensky, Precentor."

"Implying that they may have had contact with Kerensky's forces after they vanished."

"Yes, sir. One of my profilers suggests this may be the reason for their current lack of jump ships and fusion engines. General Kerensky stripped every base he could before exiting the Inner Sphere. The

General was Regent for the League before Lord Richard's ascension to the throne. It is only logical to assume that as Regent, he would have been fully briefed on the Masada operation."

"As well as on its location, and therefore could have done the same to Motherload, stripping them of everything useful that wasn't absolutely immobile. At gunpoint. Which would elegantly explain their attitude towards both pirates and Kerensky himself. Perhaps too elegantly."

"I admit to some suspicion there myself, sir, but until we gain further hard data about these people, it's the best theory at the moment. However, we're aware of the dangers of falling in love with a pet theory, and are trying our best to avoid that pitfall."

The Precentor hid a smile. The young man was maturing well, clearly aware of his own faults and already moving to correct them. He would make a fine asset for the Word of Blake eventually.

Hilton Head
Terra
23 February 3023

Patricia Copperfield, Precentor in charge of the Free Worlds desk at Hilton Head, was enjoying a moment of peace and tranquility in one of the Hilton Head complex's many lovely gardens. The warmth of the spring sun washed over her face and made her feel warm despite the rather chilly air. Unfortunately it seemed as if the moment wouldn't last much longer as she heard approaching footsteps in the gravel.

"May I join you?" The intruder asked.

Patricia raised her hand to shield her eyes from the brightness of the spring sun as she looked up at the intruder.

"Primus!" Patricia said startled at the sudden appearance of the leader of Comstar in her quiet little garden moment. She started to rise from the bench but Tiepolo motioned for her to remain seated.

"Oh, don't get up Precentor Copperfield" the Primus said as he took the seat besides her. He sighed deeply, closed his eyes and turned his face towards the sun. "It's a Lovely day today. I prefer the North garden but it is a bit chilly there this time of year."

"Yes Primus." Patricia agreed.

"I read your report and recommendations on Motherlode." The Primus shifted the conversation around without changing the tone of his voice. "It was very... umm, different. The opinions of other departments differ greatly from yours, particularly those from the Combine desk." He paused for a moment. "Departments who's actual job it is to conduct analysis of information from the Periphery beyond the Draconis Combine."

Tiepolo was looking at her with an amused smile.

"Primus, I..." Patricia started to apologize but the primus interrupted

her.

"Oh I don't mind Precentor, and it was a very interesting point of view of the problem. I'm not saying I agree with all aspects of it, but it was certainly a novel and interesting approach to the Motherlode mystery." Tiepolo said as he closed his eyes and faced the sun again with a smile.

So if it wasn't her trespassing on the turf of other branches that had caused this 'chance' meeting then it had to be the brief recommendations she had attached to the report. The air suddenly seemed colder than a moment ago. The silence stretched until Tiepolo broke it.

"It is your suggestion that the order, ah how did you put it. 'Match the planned education efforts of the Coalition of Sovereign Nations at Antallos by improving the order's own education efforts in the Outworlds Alliance to include hard sciences and engineering in Comstar run school curriculums.' That has caused a few raised eyebrows." Tiepolo said. "You do realize that such a change would represent a major shift in our blessed order's policy?"

Copperfield had served long enough in Comstar to recognize the danger of being branded a heretic, particularly when it was the Primus himself, the voice of Blake, who dangled the hook so obviously in front of her.

"I am worried, Primus." Patricia replied. "I fear that we have failed in the task the Blessed Blake entrusted to us."

"Why would you think that, Precentor?" Tiepolo asked, it obviously not being the answer he had expected.

"It is over two centuries ago that the Blessed Blake stood in the doorway and watched the great storm of the Succession wars break over mankind, two centuries ago that the order closed the door to the rest of the galaxy. Two centuries of war, hate and suffering – and there is no ending in sight." Patricia stared into the far distance as she tried to frame her thoughts in a non-heretical manner. "For the last century there have been little, if any, change in the status quo."

"And you would have us change that by giving the blessing of technology to those who's ability to handle such responsibility has to be doubted?" Tiepolo wondered.

"No." Patricia replied. Any other answer to that question would have been heretical. "I would rather hand loaded assault rifles to six year olds than advanced technology to the Successor Lords, it would probably do much less damage."

"Then what do you suggest?" Tiepolo asked.

"As I said, I fear we might have missed our opportunity to fulfill Blake's vision. The Successor States obviously are not going to hammer themselves any further down into barbarism than they managed to do after the first century of war. If they intended to go further down that path they could easy have destroyed their remaining yards and factories long ago. I fear our order's moment was a century ago."

"You exaggerate Precentor." Tiepolo said shaking his head sadly. "The decline continues, the PPC is practically Lostech in the League as you should know. The Inner Sphere is not yet ready for the restoration of the Star League, I wish it was different but..." His voice trailed off.

"I fear the Successor states and the so called 'Great Houses' will never be ready for the restoration, nor will the houses ever allow themselves to sink into total barbarism since that would destroy them just as surely as the restoration of the Star League by our Order will. We may have waited for the wrong people to do what we expected and in doing so we might have missed our moment." She turned to the Primus. "Just how would the people react if they have just stood helplessly by and watched their house burn to the ground, and only then do their neighbor pull out his fire hose from the garage and put out the rubble?"

"The people of Antallos seem to have reacted favorably to the appearance of the Coalition." Tiepolo pointed out. "Our order is generally viewed favorably by those unfortunates who inhabit marginal worlds."

"This Coalition of Sovereign Nations is a new player, but our Order has existed since the wars began. We don't have their luxury of starting with a clean sheet. After all, the people of the Inner Sphere have no reason to trust our Order or the wisdom of the Blessed Blake. For the better part of a century we have given them little reason to put their faith in us despite our PR campaigns. We have failed to give them a concrete example of how things could be better." Patricia continued. "How long would the average Inner Sphere citizen's trust in us last once they realize that the improvements we might eventually make could have been done a century ago? That is my concern, Primus."

"I doubt things are quite as bleak as you seem to think Precentor. You judge our predecessors a bit harshly." Tiepolo said after a moment's thought. "You know any technology we give to the Inner Sphere will just cause the Scavenger Lords to upgrade their military capacity and heat up the war again. Real progress isn't possible as long as the Successor States and their rulers remain in control of mankind's destiny."

"Yes I know." Patricia said hesitatingly. "But if we are the ones providing the people with the means to improve their lives in the Inner Sphere and the Successor Lords are the ones who take those gifts and use them to smash and ruin each other, including their own peoples, how would the populations come to view that behavior? That is why the Outworlds Alliance is a perfect test case for us. It is poor, peaceful and humble before the dangers and blessings of technology; it is an ideal chance to finally provide the peoples of the Inner Sphere with an alternative to their House Lords."

Tiepolo didn't answer directly.

"It has been an interesting discussion but I shouldn't keep you from your duties any longer." The primus said after a long wait.

Patricia was about to protest that she had been here first but thought better of it and quickly left the Primus enjoying the sun in her favorite spot in the garden.

"You heard?" Tiepolo asked.

"Yeah" an old man said as he was rising laboriously from behind some nearby bushes. "Oh, I'm getting to old for all this cloak and dagger crap Julian."

"Rubbish! You couldn't wait to get out of that stuffy office the Fundamental branch has stuck you in. Once ROM, always ROM." Tiepolo said with a light laugh. "So what do you think of our Precentor?"

"It could go either way. Certainly there is enough heresy to convict, if that is what you need. It isn't the greater heresy of objective but only a matter of means, which can be serious enough. Miss Copperfield's heart seems to be in the right place though." The old man replied.

Tiepolo thought about that response for a while. "What about her opinions on our means?" He asked.

"It is not at all uncommon among the lower ranks. Many join the Order out of a desire to help humanity so when we place restraints on them it is naturally very frustrating, although most understand and accept the restrictions. Even so unauthorized leaks of minor technical information and charity work by the Order's techs have been on the rise recently, her suggestions for dealing with the Coalition and the Outworlds Alliance will resonate well inside the rank and file of the order." The old man regarded Tiepolo closely. "She does have a point, with the Coalition's efforts on Antallos many within the Order will ask 'why not us' and many without the Order will ask 'why not sooner' if we were to start up such programs, it is a delicate situation. Particularly since the more, ah, energetic elements of our Order are so eager to unveil the Sword of Blake and settle things in the manner of the Great Houses."

"You have been listening to Waterly then." Tiepolo said.

"It is hard not to considering the loud volume of her shrill unpleasant voice and the frequency with which she uses it. Many do listen eagerly however, particularly the younger members of my former branch and my current branch. I know she is your protégé Julian but,

Precentor Dieron? You have elevated her to a position where her opinions will carry real weight. High enough for certain elements to concentrate around her." The old man fell silent and he and the Primus sat in silence for many minutes enjoying the warm spring sun.

"So..." the Primus broke the silence "Perhaps we could use a counterbalance to our energetic activists."

EDIT: Made a few edits suggested by Visitor

Von Straub Testing Facility, Hesperus II

March 20th, 3023

"Long Tom Assault Gun prototype final test phase 1 starting."

Hermann Steiner, standing in the safety of one of the observation shelters of the facility, sceptically watched through the armored glass as the ungainly vehicle rolling into the range, a pair of binoculars in hand just like the rest of the small crowd. 'What an ugly crate did they turn my Rommel into?' The vehicle he observed did indeed share only scant similarities to the heavy tank the design team in this remote artillery testing facility had been given just six weeks ago. True, he could still readily identify the base chassis, with the broad tracks, flat sides and steep upwards angle on the thick frontal armour. But above this, instead of the turret, the chassis extended into what could only be described as a rectangular armored box with angled sides and front covering everything in front of the flat engine deck at the rear. And out of the front of this box stuck a truly enormous gun. The same small laser that the original tank carried, now in a ball mount in the frontal hull next to it, seemed more like an afterthought compared to that.

He shook his head. No turret, but only slightly lower profile than a Rommel? Sure, they had explained it to him as the gun taking that much space, but still. As he watched, he gained at least a somewhat positive impression as the vehicle navigated the obstacle course just as well as the Patton and Rommel prototypes had. Not that it surprised him. The engineers hadn't toyed around with the powerpack or the suspension of the original design and the changed center of gravity wasn't nearly enough to overcome the redundancies built into these components.

"Test phase 2 now commencing."

Having navigated the obstacle course, the prototype rolled over a slight hill, coming to face with two large buildings. They were empty eight-storey constructions made from steel-reinforced concrete specifically for this test and turned into a mock defensive position with a series of simulated targets, including a failed light Mech

prototype that had been stripped of anything valuable long since, destined to spend its remaining days as a test target.

The vehicle turned slightly, angled its gun and opened fire with a roar. All Hermann Steiner and the assembled crowd could see was a large explosion suddenly erupting in front of the first building, a gigantic cloud of dust obscuring their sight. Half a minute later, the dust settled and Steiner was able to see the devastation. The front half of the target building had collapsed into a pile of rubble. The trenches and two earthen bunkers in front of it had been replaced by a large crater. As he watched on, the remainder of the target building started collapsing.

Seemingly not satisfied, the prototype fired another shot, this time at the light Mech. Unlike with the first shot, the damage done was readily apparent. The 30-ton mockup, or rather a mangled chunk of metal Steiner thought to be its torso and head, was thrown backwards by the blast and only came to a rest more than a dozen meters from its original position. Now firing at maximum rate, the prototype put another two shells into the remaining target building, likewise reducing it to a pile of rubble.

Steiner took a glance at his wristwatch. The entire test phase had taken not even two minutes. He would make sure to venture out to the range and take a closer look, but he had to confess to himself that that had impressed him. He glanced at the young man beside him and smiled. Florian Pabst was visibly doing his best (and failing spectacularly) to hide his nervousity and not look at the very uncle of the Archon standing next to him.

"Mr. Pabst."

The youngster almost jumped. "Sir!"

'Well, he remembered that I like that more than being called *excellency* at least.' "At ease, young man. No need to be nervous. I'll take a look at the range later, but what I saw here doesn't look bad at all. Not at all. That's an awful lot of firepower this little project of yours throws around. Still, I heard you have some problems to iron out?"

Pabst took a deep breath and answered. "It's not so much ironing out, sir, as trying to find a way around them. The sad fact is that the autoloader system of the Long Tom Cannon simply can't handle our armor-piercing shells. They're too top-heavy. And there's similarly not enough space left to put in more than the 20 shells of ammunition the vehicle already carries. Though, I think we have found a somewhat satisfactory workaround."

"Oh"

"Our plan is to install a small munitions crane on the rear of the vehicle. The ammo hatch is still at the rear of the compartment, though we took your suggestion and redesigned it to be just as thick as the remaining armor. The crane should allow rapid restocking in the field despite the fact that we are talking about 200 kilogram projectiles here. It also allows to load one shell directly from the hatch into the gun, bypassing the autoloader; unlike the autoloader, the gun itself has no problems handling AP. Though I personally cannot see anything short of a military DropShip or a Castle Brian that would warrant AP over a high explosive shell."

Steiner nodded. He had known about these issues before, but he appreciated the honesty. His opinion of the young project leader rose again.

"Cost?"

"Rather steep now, sir, but that's mostly due to the experimental nature of the short-barrel cannons. If we start manufacturing them in bulk, the vehicle would likely be less expensive than the Rommel or Patton. We managed to simplify a lot by getting rid of the turret and on a proper assembly line, the vehicle will be easier and cheaper to construct and maintain than it's parents."

"Impressive. Given what it has shown here, I'll have to give this project of yours my blessing. Yes, that machine would make a great direct fire support asset for other armor and infantry units." Steiner could see the man's face brighten up. "That still leaves one question, though. Does it have a name?"

Pabst was caught on the wrong foot. "Sir?"

"A name, young man. Long Tom Assault Gun might be enough for a development prototype, but for a full-scale fighting vehicle?"

"Um, no, Sir, I fear we haven't thought about that."

"Oh well. Hmmm, to think about it... I think I have an idea."

"Yes, sir?"

"We named the tanks from Project Desert Knights after famous tank generals from the Second World War on pre-diaspora Terra."

"Um, yes, sir." That the former tank officer telling him this, known as an avid scholar of military history, had played a major part in that name choice was all but common knowledge for anyone knowing about Desert Knights at all.

"Well, in the years before that very same war, the Germans started creating the first assault guns in history. Actually, some of those even looked rather similar to your creation here. And one certain Colonel that would later be one of their best generals played a key role in creating them. How does Von Manstein sound as a designation?"

**Training area, 30 klicks outside Port Krin
April 4th, 3023**

"FIRE!"

"On the way."

The cannon of the Merkava roared as it sent a shell out towards the target. The training shell, little more than a fin-stabilised spike made of mere soft steel, bridged the gap to its intended target in less than a second, only to fly above the shoulder of the Valkyrie as it began its descent upon deactivating its Jump Jets. Another projectile had more luck and hit Mech into the side torso. Unable to do any meaningful

damage, the projectile simply bounced off, but not before the computers on board of the Mech would recognise the hit and apply the simulated damage of a to its armor. And then, the Mech vanished behind a dune.

To say that Captain Jakob Nordin, CO of 2nd company, 3rd battalion, was an unhappy man would have been an understatement. Having arrived only the week before from Earth, this was the first live exercise for him and his men, and it was not going as he wished it to. At first, his task had appeared simple, just an advance through the sector against an enemy blocking force allegedly consisting of Mechs and armor, but a good deal below the strength of his company. He had heard a few second-hand comments about these mercs, the Buron Cavalry, and had been eager to train with them.

That, of course, had been before the current situation had started. A lance of light Mechs were utilising their jump jets and the broken ground dominating the western of the training area to stall his advance to a crawl. Nordin had seen aerial photographs of that area in the briefing and knew that to try and follow his assailants into it would be folly. The entire place was a virtual mess of wadis, creeks, steep dunes and broken ground of the type that no sane tanker would ever want to have to drive over even under the best of circumstances. With a lance of jump-capable, hostile Mechs at large, driving in there would be nigh-suicidal. And yet, the very same area offered them the perfect opportunity to pester his advancing company by repeatedly jumping just high enough to crest the dunes, firing a salvo and dropping back into cover, presenting a minimal target.

As on cue, the Valkyries answer, a flight of five LRM, hit the lead tank of third platoon. "Gunfighter 3-1, damage report, over", Nordin spoke into his radio.

"Minor armor damage only, over."

Almost inaudibly, Nordin sighed. The tank of his XO had been knocked out almost immediately as this stupid skirmish had begun. An LRM flight had hit the tracks of the Merkava and once the tank was immobilised, the two Jenners and the Javelin compromising the remainder of the light lance had concentrated their fire on such an

easy target. 'I've had enough of this stupid game of whack-a-Mech. We're wasting time for no real reason', the captain thought as one of the Jenners did another hit-and-run before diving below the crest of the dunes. He made his decision and spoke into the radio once more. "Gunfighter Six to all Gunfighter elements. Form up and advance towards Phase Line Bravo." He had had enough. Time to concentrate on the objective. Phase Line Bravo was due north of his current position and dominated by good, open ground. If those damn Mech-jocks wanted a piece of him, they were welcome to try and follow his company into the open ground and get themselves shot up. And then he could concentrate on the advance on his real objective on Phase Li-

"INCOMING!" Shaken up by the sudden call, the GDI captain couldn't do anything but watch in horror as what appeared to be a large salvo of missiles rained down on 3rd platoon. No, he corrected himself, not on 3rd platoon, but only their command tank. Recovering almost immediately, Nordin tried to contact the stricken tank, but a second missile salvo already landed on it. "3-1 is down. I repeat, 3-1 is down" it shouted from the radio. And to make matters worse, those damnable light Mechs started another attack, sending a fusillade of LRM, SRM and laser fire into 2nd platoon, simultaneous to more missile fire from seemingly nowhere raining down on his tanks. Nordin's training kicked into gear and he immediately ordered his company out of the beaten zone. Nobody had told him about goddamn rocket artillery, but that wasn't an excuse to get his company trashed. Already reports came in. No tanks beyond 3-1 had been lost so far, but 2nd platoon had two more immobilised and with more indirect fire coming in, he gave them a short lifespan indeed.

He just started ordering the company to increase distance from the broken ground when he saw them. A quartet of squat, ugly shapes crested the dunes, and for a second, Nordin thought that his eyes were playing a trick on him. A notion that was debunked rather messily as a salvo of PPC fire ripped into one of the Merkavas of 2nd platoon. Dutifully, the training systems recorded the hits of the low-powered shots, assessed the damage they would have done in a real battle and shut down the "destroyed" tank. "Contact, enemy armor, 10 o'clock!" Nordin still could hardly believe it. Those madmen had to have driven their tanks right through that absolute clusterfuck of

terrain to outflank his force! And his bewilderment only grew as the lance of tanks accelerated down the loose side of the dune, towards his company. Everything he had ever learnt screamed at them to stop this reckless bullshit. There was no way to pull that stunt without throwing the tracks! And yet, all four of those damn tanks were already closing on the bottom of the dune and still going.

Return fire from the Merkavas began hammering the incoming tanks, but their armor seemingly held and another GDI tank was knocked out by a salvo of PPC fire. And then the attacking lance fired a salvo of SRM, apparently spread out over the whole company. Nordin didn't fully register the intent before the missiles exploded around his tanks, blanketing his company under clouds of thick, black smoke. Knowing full well that he had to get the situation back under control, and fast, he started giving orders...

45 minutes later, command post outside the training area

Nordin entered the CPs briefing room full of apprehension, expecting an epic dressing down. Upon entering the small room and taking in the sights of several rows of seat facing a projector wall, with a coffee machine tucked into a corner, he was greeted by Captain Nicholas Cawthorn, the CO of 1st company and an old friend of his. Both saluted each other before Cawthorn took the initiative. "Take a seat over there. I'm gonna fetch us some coffee. Nice job out there, Jakob. Major Heller is going to be here in ten minutes so we can start the debrief."

"Yeah, thanks, Nick. I'm so looking forward to the major tearing me apart for letting those mercenaries hand me my ass on a platter. Two killed light Mechs, a killed Manticore and another one immobilised, plus some damage to the rest in exchange for my entire company? The major is going to rip my head off."

"Nah, don't be so harsh on yourself."

"Harsh? I got my entire company wiped out by a bunch of mercs at a ludicrous casualty rate!"

"You, Jakob, and just about every other tank company CO we have

on-planet. We've been systematically putting every newly arrived company through this scenario and nobody up until now managed to beat Captain Tavrel and his men on the first try. You and your men are just the newest entry on quite a list."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, Jakob, seriously. The scenario might have been in your favour on the first glance, but the mercs know exactly how to play newcomers. Now, guess what the problems are. Tell me, what went wrong?"

"Well, I guess it started to go wrong when that damn rocket artillery came raining down on us. Made a real mess of coordination and they timed their attack just perfectly to keep the confusion going. I fucked up and lost control and unit cohesion just went poof. But how the hell did they manage to get their tanks through that bloody mess of terrain on the western part of the training area?"

"Good call, better than most. But no. Okay, for one, that 'rocket artillery' were their tanks firing those LRM racks indirectly, over the dune. The light Mechs harrassing you also acted as spotters. Not as good as laser-designators, but they can guide it in well enough if the target doesn't move too much. And no, Jakob. Your first mistake was a more simple one and one all of us trained under the old paradigm are prone to make. You allowed a bunch of pissant light Mechs to slow your company to a crawl and provoke you into a game of skeet-shooting with tanks."

"What else should I have done? Just ignore them and let them rip apart my company from behind while we drive by?"

"Exactly, Jakob. You see, that's what I mean. We were trained under a paradigm where light force can quickly cripple or kill even a heavy tank if given that kind of opportunity. It's just that we now have armor that can take a few hits and keep going. Under old circumstances, you'd have been right. But now, simply driving on, taking a few hits and continuing the advance has become a viable option. And had you done so, they would have had to either give up or follow your company out in the open, where you'd have torn them

to shreds."

"Well, and beside that, your call at the end. Yeah, closing in with and destroying the enemy is our primary task and your aggressiveness is commendable, but charging through the smoke they threw up on you, directly into close-range combat, was the worst thing you could have done, short of just sitting there doing nothing. As nice as the upgraded Merkavas are, they're still originally built under different limitations and it shows. Those Manticores simply have a lot more durability and firepower. Our advantages are accuracy at long range and better coordination. A messy, chaotic short-range slugfest is just about the worst situation you can get into against them. Doesn't help that they're arguably better at coordinating in that extreme situation, though that's more a trait of those mercenaries specifically."

Cawthorn paused, handing a cup of coffee to Nordin before taking a seat next to him.

"What do you mean with the Merkavas being built differently?" Nordin asked after taking a sip.

"What I mean is that they're pretty much obsolete now, as are any other tanks we've produced. Sure, we can up-armor them with IS Standard to a certain degree and the new guns allow us to hurt that kind of armor, but it's a slapdash solution. They're still a good deal more vulnerable than something built completely taking advantage of the material science advances the IS has made. We can only put so much new armor on them and the tanks are still more vulnerable to soft-kills and catastrophic damage upon penetration than any IS tank in their weight class."

Cawthorn took a sip of coffee before continuing. "And then there's the whole mobility thing. Yeah, IS tanks like the Manticore generally don't go faster than ours, but that's for a similar reason as us: They'd risk breaking more delicate parts of the drivetrain or throw tracks if they go too fast, so they artificially limit their top speed. Those Manticores? They're powered by a bona-fide fusion engine, Jakob. Sure, they have quite a few efficiency problems compared to our engines, but they couldn't care less. Those fusion reactors produce so much raw power that they can easily compensate by brute force and

they'll never have to worry about not having enough torque. Those things can accelerate up a steep slope just as good as they accelerate on flat ground. And their tracks and drivetrain are overall built a good deal tougher than ours, so they can go and pull maneuvers over difficult terrain that boggle the mind. That's how they managed to flank you through all those wadis and rocky ground. Well, and then there's inferno gel. That's how that Javelin killed three of your tanks at the end. If that stuff gets into the air intakes, it just makes a mockery out of our firefighting systems and melts down the engine. I heard that little reveal caused tank designers back on Earth to get more than one aneurysm. Forced them to majorly re-design their current prototypes, especially after they heard just how much everyone in the Inner Sphere seems to love using the stuff."

"Okay, that's spiffy. Still, I've never seen someone accel a tank down a dune slope like those guys did."

"Yeah, I know Jakob. That's the other thing. That tank lance under Captain Tavrel, they are freakishly good and they work together as a team to a degree of almost being able to read each others thoughts. They remind me about a few stories from my grandfather. Back in WWII, during the Battle of the Bulge, he witnessed some german veteran tankers pulling stuff he had never thought to be possible with a tank. It's kinda like that."

"What? You mean-"

"Yeah. Those guys, they've had already seen battle when we were still in basic. Hell, before that. And I had the opportunity to talk with Tavrel a few times. Going by what he told me, you'd be hard-pressed to find any tanker back on Earth with the kind of combat experience that he and his men have unless you go straight to searching for WWII veterans. And even amongst them, you'd probably have to search hard. So take it easy, Jakob. You got your ass handed to you on a platter by a bunch of guys that have done this kind of thing on real battlefields for longer than you've been a soldier."

Nordin just shook his head. "Those guys sound crazy."

"Heh, you don't even know half of it. Wait until you meet Tavrel in

person. You could almost call him schizophrenic. For all his seriousness once business starts, he's a walking violation of regulations outside. I can't imagine that eccentric working anywhere but in a merc company that is willing to tolerate his antics as long as he's providing the skills. He's a friendly and laid back guy to the point where you'd think he's an old hippie. Still a bit strange, though. But then, they all are."

"Who's strange?"

"Those mercs. Well, at least the ones they didn't hire on Earth to replace their losses. Culture shock is perhaps the best way to describe it. I guess most of it is their entire attitude. They have no qualms to fight for the highest bidder or outright being sent into combat against the same people that paid them just a few weeks ago. They really see war as nothing but business. But at the same time, they still have a moral code and a code of honor and they hold themselves to it. They're perfectly fine with the idea that they could get killed and from what I've seen, they wouldn't even really hold a grudge against someone trying it. But at the same time, you have that almost tribal system of loyalty to their unit and their families and they're crazy protective of their non-combatants."

"Can best be explained with what Tavrel told me a few weeks ago. I met him in a bar in town during leave and after a few drinks, he started reminiscing. To paraphrase: 'Someone tries killing me in a warzone, it's just business. I'll try my level best to stay alive and all, but there won't be any hard feelings afterwards. I'm doing my job, they're doing theirs, no problem in that. But someone going after our dependents, our families, that's personal. That's damn personal and we're going to kill the bastard and all his friends. No prisoners, no mercy. If someone threatens our families, we make an example of him. And that's why the Combine wants our heads. They weren't exactly happy about how we ripped apart their Mech battalion on Thestria after they gunned for our dependents. And even less about how we afterwards demolished every last bit of useable equipment we couldn't take with us. Served the bastards right.' Cawthorn just shook his head. 'Strange guys. I wonder what a shrink would think of them.'"

"Um, wow. I guess I'll have to meet the guy in person."

"You will Jakob, he's going to come for the de-brief, too. Now, why are they taking so long?"

Royal Palace, Tharkad City
Tharkad, Lyran Commonwealth
May 2nd, 3023

A weary Simon Johnson rubbed his eyes, laying down the latest report someone had deemed necessary to be brought to his attention. A casual glance at the remaining pile on his desk didn't lift his stressed mood, either. *And could anyone not have sympathy with me?*, the head of Lyran intelligence wondered in his thoughts. *It's what? 2:30 in the morning already and I'm still sitting here going through all these reports with the damned blizzard outside as the only atmosphere.* He yawned. At times like these, he almost considered the somewhat remote and quiet office he had chosen for himself as a liability.

One more and he would call it a night, he promised to himself. He picked up the next file and started reading the header. Antallos, with a priority mark? It took him a second to recognize, a fact he blamed on the late hour. That damn unsanctioned Loki op, right! Taking a look at the source, he identified it as the drop-off point for the eventual mission report by the Loki team. Calling the details into memory, the team itself was supposed to spend another two to three months masking their tracks before returning. Johnson almost cursed. A mission report that early meant that the Heimdall agents he had sent after the operatives must have come too late. Forgetting his weariness and the blizzard still raging outside the window, Johnson began reading the report. Partial success? He dreaded at the meaning of that. Reading further, the feeling became more profound. They had really done it. Started a fake terrorist campaign, carried out bombings, the whole damn thing. And then he came to the climax of it.

Simon Johnson was not a man known for swearing. *"Oh fucking hell."* So, GDI or the Port Krin police had identified the team and tried

storming their hideout just as the team had gathered for their big coup de gras. And apparently GDI had thought that they were dealing with a bunch of local yokels. Loki agents being what they were, the team hadn't gone quietly. He just stared at the paper in disbelief. 80% of the team, the entire operational part of it, dead. And they had taken several unidentified GDI elite troops with them before executing their suicide-contingency. Well, he reasoned, perhaps better than what the original OP plan had been.

Going over the aftermath provided scant relief. Four days after the destruction of the team, several anonymous tips and a nice batch of evidence, some faked, some pretty genuine, had been sent to both local and CSN-native reporters in Port Krin. The reaction afterwards confirmed earlier reports about the independence CSN media apparently enjoyed. And the series of public reports about the Draconis Combine being the prime suspects in a series of terrorist incidents that had killed 17 GDI soldiers (not counting the losses of their strike team) and 52 civilians had had interesting effects, to say the least. Official GDI sources had further fueled the conflagration by denying any comment at first. Johnson read of riots in the streets, even the Combine embassy being attacked by angry mobs for a short time before police intervened. The main objective, the report stated, was not fully achieved, but relations between the CSN and the Combine had taken at the least a temporary hit.

As cold as it sounded, Johnson couldn't but be relieved. After all the horror-scenarios this trigger-happy Loki idiot could have gotten them into when he started his little private operation, it had worked out well enough in the end. A cruel smile appeared on his face. Not well enough for the man responsible, though. For all their tendency to go over the top, Loki had a rather strong distaste for loose cannons. Especially if their operations resulted in Loki agents being killed. And Johnson, after a discussion with the Archon, had given them the job of cleaning up their own mess. The surviving agents would be luckier. They had had no reason to doubt the orders they were given, so no blame would fall on them.

The remainder of the report was nothing but another study of general information on the CSN. The team had been tasked with data collection as a secondary objective, but Johnson couldn't find

anything the LIC office on Antallos hadn't reported earlier. With a diplomatic mission aimed to secure an embassy planned in a few months, they still had a frustratingly low amount of real data on this new minor power. The huge report they had snatched from MIIO had helped a lot, but half his analysts flat-out refused to believe much of it and the small task force founded for anything regarding the CSN was awash with all kinds of theories, assessments, possible explanations and so on. Well, at least that poor sod on Antallos wouldn't have to work on a shoestring anymore after the mission arrived.

Johnson took a glance at the clock adorning one of the walls. Almost 3:00 AM. He sighed. Alright, just one more report and he'd go get sleeping. Tomorrow, he'd have to present this to Archon Katrina and he already expected her to get riled up one last time over this entire debacle.

Giant merger rocks PMC business

New York - Sat May 3rd 2008/3023 - 11:30am EST

(Reuters) - Blackwater International has completed its merger with eleven other security firms, including former PMC heavyweights DynCorp International and Aegis Defense Services, creating the largest private military corporation currently existing on Earth.

In a statement on Saturday, Blackwater CEO and founder Eric Prince said that the final transactions closed the previous day. With the largest merger ever recorded in the private security sector finished, he announced the companies intent to rename itself into Artemis Interstellar Security.

The merger came together under hopes of creating a company with the means necessary to compete in the large-scale mercenary market of the Inner Sphere and Mr. Prince announced that Artemis Security has already begun preparations for the creation of a full-scale combat unit and logistical support units of as yet undetermined size.

To procure the manpower and equipment necessary, Artemis announced a strategic partnership with Textron Marine & Land Systems as well as its intent to open a branch office on Antallos in hopes of accessing the Inner Sphere weapons market within the next 3 months. Textron announced the production of a new light tank design and an armored personnel carrier utilizing Inner Sphere technology within one year.

(Reporting by Yinka Levine and Eric Adegoke; Editing by Dan Collins)

***Tramp-class Jumpship Minerva May*, Earth-Moon Lagrange Point
1
System S3-19570410 (Sol-II/"Motherload"), Grantville Cluster
February 18, 2007/3022**

The old Jumpship *Minerva May* re-entered Sol space right on time, its newly automated systems transmitting the clearance code to nearby missiles. Captain Azonia Murrough stared slightly nervous at the 'Motherload' made display, before a warning message switched from yellow to green before flashing off. The small crew around her seemed to relax almost at once.

"All clamps good, evacuation complete, power shunts confirmed off, and station keeping engine warming up. Ready for separation." Kim Barnirov called out from her station as she read the displays as the increasingly automated systems did their jobs without her having to lay a finger on a key.

A small orangish haired girl, Shammie Pollone, nodded before speaking a loud into a headset, "Drop ships *Eternal Hope* and *Zen* you are cleared for separation."

Confirmation from those two ships rolled back before Shammie tapped on their docking icons on the touch screen. Faint clanks sounded off to those who knew what to listen for. Shammie looked over at Banessa Laird as she watched for a few moments as the Dropships accelerated away, before nodding back at Shammie.

Shammie turned back to her screen, "*Prometheus*, are you go for separation?"

A voice floated over the airwaves, "Yes, Shammie, lets get going before our 'employers' get annoyed with us by lazing around."

Shammie glanced back at Azonia with a worried look before replying, "Ok, Claudia, undocking you now."

A final set of clanks sounded out though the old ship as one of its old companions left it. Virtually gutted of its normal supplies, its cargo

bay filled with salvage from Port Krin. Even the Mech Stalls had been left on Antallos, for the remaining mech forces use. The *Prometheus* and its cobbled together engine and patched hull started a painfully slow burn back to Earth orbit.

Azonias shook her head as she watched the battered Dropship limp painfully away from her ship. "Zak, bring us about into our normal parking area."

A bead of sweat slipped down Azonias's head as the helmsman nodded absently as he started the ship moving away from its entry point, being careful of the recent construction around the area. Not to mention keeping his eyes away from any of the captain.

Banessa shifted in her seat as her sweat built up, pausing for a moment to make sure her bikini was still in place, meant for a gravity environment, not a zero G environment, before working on remapping local space. On the main monitor the local map came up with a set of unidentified icons, as the ship slowly moved out of the jump point. Passing her fingers over the board as the rest of the crew watched. Slowly more points popped up onto the screen as the radar reached out further and received more information.

More monitoring and weapons platforms began to dot the area, but the biggest point of interest was something slowly coming together just outside the jump point. At the current time it was just a crude frame work, but to those who had seen dozens of them, the outline of a Star League (SL) recharging station was clearly visible. Large tanks of reaction mass were already attached to the frame work. Although, as the command line Jumpship a distance away from the station showed, it wasn't yet operational. With the Jumpship's sail wide open and the engine burning.

As the ship moved out of the jump point area a rather large satellite noticed a new ship coming into its location with the correct IFF signature. A small, low powered laser played over the ship quickly before finding and initializing a connection link. Moments later the local storage buffer was dumping new data into the C-Earth build data systems of the *Minerva May* as it slowly moved into its final position. While data from the jump ship was downloaded back to GDI

command center. All of this went on unnoticed by the command crew. Granted, most of their attention was on the new structures in space that the upload contained, which the ships systems correlated with its data.

A squeak of delight from Kim caught the rest of the bridge crews' attention. Except for Zak, who kept his eyes firmly on his station. Azonia simply raised her eye brows at the woman, "Well, what? You found a new boyfriend though that 'Motherload' dating service?"

Blushing at the question, "Hey, just because... Oh, look, the 'Motherloaders' have a shipyard in orbit!" Kim pointed out before she let her mouth cause her to do a round or two of cleaning the hallway with a toothbrush. Shammie was still on the captain's black list for her last response on that issue two weeks ago. Granted, that had been after she had been found encouraging a Japanese Army man from the ship's ten man detachment from the 1st Airborne Brigade. Nor was that soldier's commander happy on his end.

Mostly ignoring Kim's almost comment, except for a flat look, Azonia watched as Kim busied herself opening a small window on the main monitor to show her screen. As she ignored the captain's flat look at her back.

The large flat screen showed a grainy image of a small shipyard in high orbit of the planet. As she stared at it, a thousand thoughts went though her mind, slowly focusing on getting some repair time somehow. From Shammie's squeal of delight, that was likely her thinking too, the *Minerva May* had way to many patches for knocked out heat sinks. Which made it hell during jumps, to the fact that most of the crew owned well worn beach wear to cope with the heat.

"Captain," Banessa called out, "incoming signal, it looks like mail time."

Blinking away from the image, Azonia looked at her screen besides her chair as the computers churned though the mess of data. Almost immediately one message popped up for her on her chair's monitor, from Miriya unsurprisingly. Tapping on it, the icon opened up to show her what she feared. One picture showed a beach as Miriya ran

past holding some clothing, next picture showed a bared Rick running past missing his swim trunks, another showed a topless Lisa glaring at the camera. Azonia just rubbed the bridge of her nose.

She was friends with those two, nothing more! Would Miriya stop trying to set her up with them. Sure, Rick was Miriya's childhood friend, maybe a bit more than that, but could she stop trying to pimp him and his wife out to her. She needed a love life, she got it, please stop it.

The rest of the crew focused harder on their mail as Azonia seemed to growl from her seat. Her rant on the subject was well known, going something like. That she liked men, but was it her fault that most of them didn't know how to handle a girl with a strong attitude? Roy could handle it quite well, granted, his 'girlfriend' had him on a short leash most of the time. Or his virtually adopted brother, he could handle it well.

Although, Azonia silently hoping that Claudia wouldn't do anything too rash, Roy had been killed, then her Dropship repaired, shot down, repaired slightly, and then reduced to a space going hull. No, the past year hadn't been too kind to her.

It took the ship another hour to get in position, and another hour to get the sail and the patches for the heat sinks deployed. Leaving a crew of sweating individuals in soaked though cloths.

Tramp-class Jumpship Minerva May
20,000 km away from Earth-Moon L1 Point
Earth Space
Three hours later

"Captain," Banessa quietly called out, "incoming message for you."

Azonia nodded absently as she accepted the message on her monitor. Lisa's face popped up on screen, "Azonia, is Claudia..." Lisa's face on screen twisted slightly, "'Ok,' for lack of a better term."

"No worse than she was. Granted, she was getting better, but you know how she gets near any of her 'distant relations'--DAMN IT!!"

Azonia started cursing violently at something that Lisa couldn't see, but could guess.

"GDI fleet against Clan?" Lisa guessed, Azonia's was the GDI's best SL fleet tactics expert, which the Clans had likely evolved from. Modified to fit expected Clan weapon ranges, armor, and personalities. Granted, Azonia herself admitted, she had at best a book learning, but that was better than vast majority of even some of the best House experts, who usually ranked along the lines of learned amateur.

"No, to far from Earth, doing a local sim, Clan against SL, and I 'was' the SL fleet. Unfortunately, my flagship died at long range so my fleet is getting torn though like wet paper with that range advantage." Azonia flinched as a cruiser spewed plasma from a simulated near hit on the reactor.

"So," turning away from the main screen as her simulated fleet was torn apart by its AI counter part. "What do you want?"

"You're being pulled from the Antallos run. Our employers are wanting you to pull out of the L1 area and put a burn in for that area the small shipyard you should see in orbit." Lisa bit her bottom lip for a moment before continuing.

"Expect to be not doing any moving for a month or two. I'll have a load of techs will be waiting for you. R&R as been approved by the way, so I'll talk to you more about this when you are down." Azonia stared at the image of Lisa for a moment.

"I won't say much on the subject as I expect you brought those issues up already. I expect there is a *very* good reason for this." Lisa let out a breath she had been holding, "I'll get moving as soon as the system's lock back down. Azonia out."

Cutting the link, she turned to the pilot who was watching the simulate rout on the main screen. "Zak!"

The single male on the bridge automatically turned to look at her, and just as quickly look away. Azonia's jump outfit, which the crew

still hadn't changed out of, left her assets in full view, except for the patches of material lightly glued over her breasts. The GDI still hadn't supplied a outfit that fit her yet, not to mention the problems with getting a swimsuit that fit her, being a G-cup was a large pain for clothing.

"Begin, lock down," she ignored the groans from the people around her, "and begin a burn to put us by that shipyard."

The crew picked up at the last bit of information as they moved to ready the ship for inner system travel.

Tramp-class Jumpship Minerva May

One jump away from Earth

CSN Controlled Space

Two months later

Azonia stared at a still unfamiliar ceiling for a few moment blankly before a light sucking feeling on one of her breasts caused her to look down, Lisa had her head on Azonia's chest while sucking on one of her breasts. Azonia stared for a moment unmindful at the sight before looking around the rest of the bed. One side had her hand clenched around had a pair of underwear, Rick on that side of the bed was looking around the pile of cloths looking for a replacement. Turning to the other side was a brown leg, hitched on the top of the bed, with the rest of its owner below her sight.

Max and Miriya were likely out on the couch, or such. The first time this had happened, she had been sure this was Miriya's work. Patting her hip ensured her that while her pants were gone, she did have on her panties, thankfully the room didn't smell of sex. Although, it did smell of faintly of liquor, given the rebuilt filtering systems that meant they had a lot last night. She idly wondered where her cloths were. Any thoughts of being horrified at the situation didn't really enter into her mind.

No, horrified only entered into the equation up until the second or third time. Now she simply wondered who was going to cook breakfast, or if the ship had already served breakfast at the mess.

Granted, normally at this point just walking was a slight challenge. Wincing at the slight pain that thought caused as it rolled around her head, Azonia carefully rolled over, removing the weight from her chest, taking note of the hickey on the spot Lisa had sucked on and the thin film of red lipstick. Wincing at the slight pain in her head at the movement.

Crawling out of her new bed with nicely rounded corners that she didn't have to worry about in this state. Carefully guided herself over to the new dresser, only to stare at it in bewilderment. The thing looked like something out of a 'Motherload' show. 'Star... something', wincing at the pain that though caused she moved onto a safer bet.

Azonia stumbling into her closet, ruffling though the cloths before pulling out one of Lisa's new silk bathrobes, pausing a moment she wondered just how that got in there before giving up on her memory of that as she shrugged it on. It barely covered her, but it was better than nothing. Leaving the bedroom, even as Lisa groaned as she started to wake up, Azonia went to the kitchen. Passing a stack of limbs that was Miriya and Max on the couch. Miriya sprawled out over her husband, both dead to the world, and the fact that they seemed to have been mid-way though trying to get naked when they fell asleep didn't phase her a bit.

Trying to focus, she nicely stopped herself from running into a new wall, as her body tried to automatically go to where her old kitchen used to be. Her rebuilt quarters were much larger than they used to be, which was proving to be a pain her her current state. Entering the kitchen she found her top from last night, stained and ripped, in front of the open fridge Rick crouched in only his newly acquired underwear. Pulling up behind him, she reached down and pulled the quart of juice from his hands as he sat it down. Chugging the contents straight from the jug before putting it back in the fridge. Leaving Rick at the fridge, his mind trying to wrap around the idea of breakfast with his hangover and a splitting headache. Her, well she had her sites set on a nice long shower.

Few had her resilience to hangover, at times like this she was very happy for that, a benefit of her Belter heritage and her grandfather's foresight in making sure she used her ancestry to ensure she had the

full Belter package during one of the more profitable years. The party last night had been to celebrate Claudia's Dropship docking and to the start of their new contract. It also was a bit that Azonia was once again in control of her ship. Granted a lot more needed to be done to it, but it was mechanically, structurally, and electronically light years beyond what it had been.

Walking past the sleeping mass on the couch, Azonia raised an eyebrow at the scrawl of permanent marker across Miriya's left butt cheek. Raising her estimation of the amount of liquor from last night, it still although didn't take the crown from the night Lisa had attempted to write her name on Rick's butt with her lipstick, close but not yet.

Slapping her close friend's ass strong enough to produce a sharp smacking sound, failed to wake her, or her husband. Neither even moved, even as Azonia's hand print showed up brightly on Miriya's cheeks. Her mind increased the amount and potency of last night's drinks as she stared slightly surprised.

Shaking off her surprise, she continued into the... "What the hell?"

The rather flimsy looking paper door stared back at her, reaching out she gently pushed on it only for it to resist her solidly. Granted that helped her peace of mind, even her current living area was a bit big for her piece of mind. Fewer safeties against the vacuum of space in larger areas.

Still, that left her outside of the bath area. Her mind finally took note of a cheerfully lite panel besides the door. Carefully pushing it caused the door to pop open as it slide into a slot in the door frame. She was starting to remember a argument about this, something about new fiddly bits?

Shaking her head she looked at a rather deep pool of steaming water just infront of the door. Ignoring that sight for now she looked around and spotted a shower unit. Sliding inside it even had a smooth panel instead of normal water controls, but one of the buttons was cheerfully labeled. "Wake Up."

Her scream though the open door cut into Rick's pained haze, causing his head to shoot up and into the third shelf in the fridge, leaving him clutching his throbbing skull. Lisa rolled off the bed and onto a newly awakened Claudia. As for Miriya and Max, dead to the world was a kind way of putting it.

A soaking wet and shivering Captain stumbled out of the shower, cussing at the new 'crap' they installed on her ship. She was still cussing as Claudia slammed into her, desperately on her way to the toilet. Tossing the woman into the hip deep steaming pool of water, before Claudia got sick on the new tiled bathroom floor.

Hearing the retching of Claudia as she resurfaced a single thought went though the back of her mind. *'Gee, this bods well.'*

The dull thumping of her feet hitting the hall's floor way, passing still unfinished sections of quarters that the few fitters from Motherload were working on. Despite the amount of work done on the ship, a lot of finishing details were still left. The second and third public bathrooms needed a lot of tile work done on them, but the third toilet room didn't even have the toilets installed.

Passing the quarters that held the Skulls ground troops, and the GDI Marines on the other side of the hall. You could hear the activity in next room that took up the entire 30 meter width of the grav-deck. The huge open room had over a hundred men, and dozens of women doing combat exercises. The biggest open area on the deck had virtually been taken over by the two groups, the 30x30 meter room made her cringe when they had suggested it; it still didn't make her happy. Even if both doors that let allowed the hallway to run though the room had airlocks on them, or the dozens of sliding 'blast doors' that ran up and down the hallway.

Exiting the room she kept up her run past the two dozen scientists with her on this trip. Some were monitoring how the new equipment worked; a few working on that new turret, although their testing had apparently been restricted due to the increasing traffic in Earth-orbit; and finally a dozen more astronomers were playing with the newly-

installed telescope, apparently very happy about the Captain's refusal to use the theoretical quick-charging, Single Day Charging, method GDI was so certain about since the extra time spent recharging the drive gave them enough time to do a local survey for each system they visited (not to mention the work they could get done while along the fairly well-surveyed route between 'Motherload' and Antallos).

Most of the scientists for the GM project were being shipped into Port Krin separate from the equipment to cut down on the time they were away from the designing boards. Running down the hallway further had the new crew quarters right next to her quarters.

Well, to say it was *her* quarters was an overstatement, considering it had room for eight people to live comfortably. It had provisions for fake walls to section off areas into bedrooms. Its own full, if small kitchen. A bath meant for eight, and a dozen other little things. Full Jumpship read outs, a holo-projector that had as its 'screen saver': a real-time read out of the local space/solar system.

At least the others moved into her room, making it seem slightly less empty. Lisa, Rick, and Claudia seemed to have claimed her bed, which had moved up from a Full to a King size. The bay personal weren't doing so well finding those other beds for her room although. It was a big enough pain to share a Full size bed with a pregnant woman, which she had reluctantly done so with both Lisa and Miriya in the past, if she still had her old bed she might just live on the bridge in her chair. By the end of this year long mission, she expected one of those two to be pregnant again, at least she had space so she wouldn't have to share again once that happened.

Pregnancy didn't react to well to long term zero-g, and normal beds on the ship weren't made to two in the beginning. At least Lisa didn't leave bruises like Miriya did. Granted, Miriya was one of her closest friends, but she was damn grabby when pregnant and sleeping.

Stopping at her door, Azonia tried to think of anything else to stop her stomach from rebelling from the light jog, she had only done three laps this morning. Granted it was with a *slight* hang-over, but still...

Giving up for the moment on her morning work out, she stumbled into her apartment. Hearing reaching sounds from the bathroom she knew were everyone likely was. Mentally clamping down on her stomach at it made a sympathetic lurch to those sounds, Azonia followed the pitiful sounds to their source.

Rick the least pale was being a good husband and friend respectively to Lisa and Miriya, holding each of their hairs up as they held onto a porcelain god. Although, his comments about breakfast wasn't earning him any brownie points. In the shower Claudia was attempting to make a go at cleaning herself up, but Max wasn't to be seen. Looking back at the couch, and then under the coffee table showed him still sleeping.

Later that day

Parsing though the report on the recharge, it seemed like the automation, even with the manual overrides were speeding up the recharge significantly. Four to five days at the outside for a full and safe recharge, this was going to annoy the astronomers, but she could live with that. What made her worry was that the new 'upgrades' might be ruining her KF-drive. Lang and Ex (the ship's engineer) were starting to give her annoyed stares when ever she call them to check on the drive. Damn it! She wasn't paranoid! She was simply par-correctly concerned about the new additions.

The next item was a almost demand by Miriya to practice their new LAMs in a zero-g combat exercise. Putting that to the side, in the state she was in Miriya wasn't in any position, or ability, to object like she usually did. Even if Azonia herself accidentally got hung-over with Miriya, it did have a positive note, Miriya couldn't protest as *excitedly* as she normally did. At this point it was just better to ignore it until tomorrow and let the Small Craft personal sometime to get over their own hang-overs.

Pausing for a moment, Azonia looked down at her breasts and stretched as she grumbled at the stiff new custom bra. She had two

dozen fresh from the 'Motherload' before they left, but last night had already started to cut into their numbers.

Returning to the report showed that Ben had finally shown back up it seemed, escaping Banessa's clutches long enough to grab lunch. Azonia had to chuckle at that, the girl had taken so long to go after him, but when she did. It was almost worthy of Miriya's attempts at Max during their pre-dating period.

'Poor man, may his soul rest in peace.' Azonia mirthfully thought to herself. At least with Miriya she didn't let up until it was done, Ben didn't have that 'luxury'. Banessa was a bit too much restrained for that, and it was dragging out their 'courtship' much longer.

Tramp-class Jumpship *Minerva May*, Antallos-Sun Lagrange Point 1

Antallos System, The Outer Sphere (Periphery)

June 1, 2007/3022

Azonia watched as the Dropships prepared to detach, with the *Prometheus* and the other set to head down to Port Krin. Her Jumpship would be mostly empty, so Azonia had eased up a bit. Feeling more at home than usual mostly because she wasn't wearing a bra under her new Macross based uniform, she had lost more than a dozen bras already on this voyage. Her time without bras vastly outnumbered the time she had bras in her wardrobe, just what god had she offend to get this curse.

Mentally shrugging she brought up the information on the current state of her investments. She had started out with a 100,000 Cbills in the ship's Comstar account. Converting that Motherload's currency after the invasion had allowed her to double that amount fairly easily by stuffing any spare space with luxuries to sell at Port Krin. After a couple round trips, she had started to run out of space for the luxuries. So she had simply attempted to find areas to invest in, and space mining was a natural choice considering her background.

In total she had about 5 million dollars stuffed into that area, and another couple thousand in chocolates, coffee, and other such 'disposable' goods. The taxes for it were a pain, but her prices were cheap compared to some. Some chocolate vendors in Port Krin were five times the cost on Motherload, while her price was between three to four depending on the market. The price for it on the nearest Combine world she had heard was as high as 20 to 30 times.

The news was showing that the space mining research group was down sizing, and the individual mining corporations where expanding. The news sighted three companies that had orders for parts to construct mining facilities, and two other companies trying to pull together the resources to put orders in for their facilities. The methods themselves went against the normal mining methods for space, but after reading their materials she could see their reasoning.

A brown set of hands grabbed her shoulders-

Five minutes later

"Damn it! Let go!" Azonia steamed in her head lock, this wasn't how you were supposed to treat a ship's captain, and her crew... traitors all of them!

"Nope!" Claudia was inordinately pleased with herself. "If I have to go down there, you do too."

Miriya holding her friend's feet just grinned as the three women passed Rick, her new armored flightsuit protecting her against Azonia's attempts to kick her way free. Lisa right besides him just smirked at the woman. "The banquet for the show was for all of us, no getting out of it, this time."

Leopard-class Dropship, Prometheus, Low Orbit **En Route To Port Krin** **June 2, 2007/3022**

When he had first seen a movie that showed in inside of a *Leopard-class Dropship*, Rick had wanted to laugh. Some native people would wonder why the Dropship had ladders along the hallways; that under

thrust the floor would become a wall was something they didn't think of. Looking at all the chairs set to the floor, along with everything else solidly following that orientation for good or bad. At least Japan had put the hardsuits' stations on circular racks to allow them to be upright if on world or under thrust.

The bathroom had been a particular horror story before the refit of the ship, the old SL gimbals that kept that room at the correct orientation had frozen solid, and getting parts for it had been a serious problem. What tied these two thoughts together was the issue of going to the bathroom in the new hardsuit. That despite its usefulness in battle for a g-suit, a set of armor, and a spacesuit. It lacked the ability to deal solid wastes that would build up after a couple days, although it could deal with liquids easily enough. Solids, although required you to completely take off the suit and go normally.

Rick finished zipping up the softsuit, the sensor studded and skin tight outfit felt more like a second piece of skin. Snapping on the hardsuit was a fairly easy affair, grabbing a box besides him that supplied power to the suit when unattached to his LAM or the Dropship. Despite all their abilities, making SL era batteries was still giving the Coalition's battery manufacturers fits. The precious metals needed for the superconductors in the capacitors made them horrifically expensive for the time being. The space mining was still at least a year out from producing significant amounts. Rick just had to shake his head at that area when ever it came up.

Climbing over to the Dropship's ready room, Rick made sure the new pilots were in good condition before heading up to the command room for the *Prometheus*. In the room, Ben tried to teach one of the new pilots how to play Go, she wasn't taking his attempts at coaching her too well, while Max sat back and looked on in amusement. Ben and the girl's VFs were attached to the top of the Dropship, after being launched from the small bays of the Minerva, to catch a ride to the planet. Miriya was stuck on the *Daedalus*, and likely annoying Azonia with her 'mad skills' at Guitar Hero, while the new male pilot tried to stay as far away from his superior, least she grab him for the drummer position in the game.

Walking into the command room, Claudia looked back at him from her chair in her Macross uniform. His lightly armored, virtual space suit, was a far cry from his old flight suit that had so many patches there was barely an original piece on it. As for it being air-tight, it would be lucky to have all its patches installed correctly. By the same token, her uniform actually fit her and was made from high quality materials, despite it not being vacuum-rated, it was still a step above most top House uniforms. In spite of all the changes, Claudia could still make him feel horribly out of place. Rather like his wife sometimes; he remembered a mental note not to question her intake of chocolate again. Her discovery of Swiss Chocolates had been an event to behold.

"Still annoyed about having to be at the display banquet?" He took a well formed guess, her firm glare was his answer.

"At least we arrive last, after Lisa and Azonia on the *Daedalus* land. Anyway, you should be launching in another thirty minutes for our re-entry display if nothing else happens to delay the unloading." Claudia said in reference to the overloading that was common on CSN Dropships, the weight limits on Dropships usually referring to the limits for flight than complete cargo capacity. Both Leopards had twice their limits in them before they had set out for Antallos. The Mule with them was carrying a mind numbing amount for that class, nearly 20,000 tons of cargo. If any of the three landed, or more precisely, tried to land. They would end up as a crater on the planet, thus their extra was offloaded in space, a time consuming and frustrating process that the local Antallos Dropships were getting rather good at as Earth had more to ship out than its on paper limits would allow.

"Remind Miriya we are only doing this display for half an hour. Then we've got to land and I have to figure out a way to wire my mouth shut for the banquet." Claudia replied as she rolled her eyes.

Rick snorted at that, "Right, and how do I do that again? My bribery material disappeared in mid-shipment."

Claudia smirked with a twinkle in her eye, "You should know that off Earth, Chocolates have a limited life span before they mysteriously

vanish."

"Vanish..." Rick eyed her skeptically as he stressed his words, "During the girls' movie night. Right. I believe you."

Antallos

20th January 2008/3023

It had been two hours. Two hours since contact was made with the enemy. As a former Clansman, Mechwarrior Brox was literally born to be in the cockpit of a Mech, but this was beyond frustrating. He wanted to smash his fist into something. No, *someone*. Preferably the commander in charge of the enemy. The Command Lance of the 1st Mech Battalion was moving as the tip of a spearhead through enemy territory, which just happened to be a mountainous region, beyond which was the city, which they had to capture as their primary objective. The enemy didn't want that, of course, so they had traps and mines aplenty on all the passes that could accommodate Heavy Mechs, and a dense concentration of AA and ASF which prevented Dropship landings closer to the objective. Now the Lance had to wait for the Combat Engineers and escorting Infantry to do their jobs and clear the way.

Any normal Clanner would balk at this cowardly way of battle, and forge ahead, scorching the earth to destroy any traps. Brox knew better than to do that, of course, but it still was '*another straw on the camel's back*' of his frustration. The primary source of his frustration though was the enemy Mechs themselves, the heaviest he'd seen and done battle with was a *Shadow Hawk*, which had been leading a Lance of five *Wasps*. The damn things were living up to their name, fire and maneuver, fire and maneuver, and they were running circles around the Command Lance.

"It's like getting pecked to death," Natalie complained, triggering her *BattleMaster's* Lasers as another *Wasp* had appeared. It got off one Medium Laser shot that nailed her Mech's left torso, before retreating out of view again with superior speed and jumpjets.

Brox spotted movement and with split second reactions sent two Laser shots that blasted apart yet another *Wasp* before it could even think of retreat.

"Nice one, Nameless," complemented Friedrich 'Rocketman' Von Braun from his *Awesome*, which was positioned in the rear of their

formation, mostly due to the fact that they didn't want his PPCs used in this area, where a missed PPC bolt could easily cause a rockslide.

Brox didn't respond. He was keeping a sharp lookout for that damn *Shadow Hawk*. The Mech in question popped into view to the right from a ridge, but four *Wasps* joined it and they all blasted their Medium Lasers and a SRM salvo into Janckowski's *BattleMaster*, which promptly lost its right leg with the cumulative damage it had sustained. The eighty five ton machine fell forward with a thunderous crash, and, just like that, the entire Lance was stalled... again.

The Command Lance retaliated as one, but they had to be sure of their targets, allowing the enemy to escape again with minimal damage and only one mission-kill on a *Wasp* that had lost its entire right arm, reducing its armament to only its SRM launcher. Brox cursed at the sight of the downed *BattleMaster*, it had fallen right where the valley was narrowest and there was no room for any of the Mechs to walk to either side.

The Clan response to this situation was rather simple: blast the impeding Mech into oblivion to let the rest of the Lance step through the wreckage, never mind the poor bastard inside. GDI, on other hand, had the philosophy that personnel were irreplaceable. More of the same machine could be made, but the skill and experience of the pilot was lost forever. So they would at least wait for the guy to get out or be cut out of the Mech before blasting it apart. It was a rather curious reversal of standard Inner Sphere thinking, where Mechs were rare and irreplaceable while the pilot inside was nothing more than cannon fodder. Brox had read an interesting article by a Motherlode scientist that had posited that Mech design as it existed today was intentionally made as such to ensure that a Mechwarrior was killed long before the Mech itself attained irreparable damage; why else would a cockpit be practically unarmored (according to Motherlode sensibilities at least) and mounted on top of the Mech chassis, or placed center mass in the torso, whereas the more logical thing to do would be to practically bury the pilot in the center of the Mech behind the thickest armor plates and use cameras, sensors and neurohelmet for vision. It had been quite a transition for Brox when the Legion's Mechs had been refitted with that philosophy in mind; no longer was there the expansive view through the transparent steel,

only the flatpanel screens of MFD displays and dim red lights illuminated his darkened cockpit.

Brox watched as the Infantry helped Jankowski out of his Mech and indeed the Lance was soon after given the order to blast the fallen *BattleMaster* to scrap, this was achieved in short order with the PPCs of the *Awesome* focused on the rear armor. The enemy chose that moment to appear again and Brox was speared with the coherent light from three *Wasps* and the missiles of the *Shadow Hawk*. He didn't take the punishment lying down though. As soon as he recovered from the hits he utterly destroyed another *Wasp* by giving it the combined attention of his torso mounted Medium Lasers whilst loosing an SRM6 salvo against the *Shadow Hawk*. Oh, how he loved these multi-acquisition targeting systems.

His missiles only scored two hits on the retreating *Shadow Hawk* before it was once again out of sight, with its two surviving compatriots

"Damn, now that is a nimble pilot!" Von Braun exclaimed with a hint of admiration. Brox could only grudgingly agree. The Lance formed up again and began moving, only for the enemy to throw what would be 'the final spanner in the works'.

Huge detonations shot towers of dirt and rock into the sky. Brox could feel the shockwaves reverberating through his Mech and he had barely the time to see the first groundcar-sized rock flying straight towards him when all his visual feeds blanked out into static and was replaced with the dreaded words, made of stylized blood, which he wanted to shove down the sim programmer's throat every time he saw it.

'Critical Mission Failure'

He wished he could snarl and curse as freely as he could when he had had a natural voice box. He triggered the sim pod to open before he lost the battle to the driving urge to send his fist crashing through the MFD displays. His eyes quickly adjusted to the low-level light of the bay which housed the pods and he was gratified to note that the rest of the command lance was just as unhappy as he was.

"What the hell was that, Major?!" Lieutenant Natalie demanded of Tony 'Hulk' Dansel, who looked very amused at the hours of frustration he'd just put his Command Lance through.

"It should be pretty obvious what that was, Lieutenant," Tony replied totally unfazed. "Prepared demo charges to create a man-made avalanche. Everything will be discussed in the debriefing, dismissed."

Brox watched the rest of the Lance go, then his eyes fixed on the sim pod that was still closed.

"Coming Brox?"

"The *Shadow Hawk* wasn't a computer opponent," he stated in the deep electronic tones of his artificial voice box.

"Nope," Dansel grinned. "Don't worry, you'll have the pleasure of meeting the pilot at the debriefing."

Debriefing Room, GDI Compound Port Krin, Antallos

The air was filled with a low din as the forty-one members of 1st Mech Battalion, GDI Foreign Legion sat in their assigned seats in the gently tiered room. The air conditioning was somewhat strained to keep up with the combined body heat added to the perpetually hot conditions of Port Krin, and the air was slowly growing stale. Brox was not one to complain about such trivialities, he just wanted to get this AAR over with. (What was it with Loders and their acronyms? The damn things were as infectious as the flu.) He wanted nothing more than to get back into a sim, preferably with the mysterious *Shadow Hawk* pilot as his opponent, this time on nice flat terrain. He hated losing and was starting to seriously consider that only fighting the scum and pirates of Antallos was making him go soft. The defenders of the City State of Kronkite had been inventive and he had had a few nice battles with a Mech or two, but the GDI Combined

Arms approach had robbed him of decent lengthy battles. His personal sim sessions were the only thing that was letting him keep his edge, but they were no substitute for the real thing, though they were damn fun.

He idly wondered if the Lodgers were actually working on the Photon Cannons he had faced in his latest sim, though he doubted that they could ever get a Mech to *Jump* itself on a planetary surface directly into combat. It was ludicrous, yet he could see the advantage that would give to any force with that capability, perhaps in the forty first century that would be possible. Brox took a pencil from his jumpsuit pocket and scribbled onto his notepad an idea he had for facing such a foe, before doing the same with his personal tablet computer. He never failed to be marveled at the versatility damn thing, though he tended to play Texas Hold 'Em most of the time with it. The touch screen interface was too cumbersome to play Mechwarrior 4 on it, which was the only negative thing about it in his opinion.

Finally, the side door opened and Dansel walked in with his customary aplomb, a clipboard and his own tablet computer tucked under his left arm.

"Atten-tion!"

The Battalion was on their feet in an instant at the call of Master Sergeant Lindsay Graham. Dansel walked to the podium and grinned at them. "As you were."

Brox and the rest of the battalion took their seats again.

"All right, folks," Dansel put the tablet and clipboard on the podium, "before we begin the AAR on the latest disaster I exposed you to. I'm bringing you official word from the brass that we're not gonna leave it at just the four closest City-States." Brox had to stop himself from grinning and he could feel the call of battle sing through his veins anew. "While none of the other cities on this planet have so far attacked GDI holdings, due to their distance or the fact that they don't have the proper combat assets to do so, it doesn't change that we can't afford to have these potentially hostile City-States at our backs. Especially in the face of possible future invasion from any of

our friendly neighborhood Houses." There were a couple of grim murmurs around the room. "So get your heads in gear for that. Our exercises in the future are going to focus on Dropship deployments with hot LZs and fighting these cities are also gonna mean that your supply line ends at your Dropship. Therefore your life and ability to fight is resting on you keeping your assigned ship in one piece.

Now, back to the sim, what you experienced was the point of view of Taurian sponsored merc unit that was looking to raid a city on a nice planet known as Duncanshire. For those of you unfamiliar with the name, it's located in the Magistracy of Canopus."

Brox narrowed his eyes in thought.

Von Braun raised a hand before asking, "Our opponents were a simulated Magistracy Lance?"

"Correct," Dansel nodded. "The Magistracy Armed Forces have limited traditional Mech forces to field. So they either pay Mercs to fill the gaps in their defenses or they fight dirty, with a whole bag of tricks that I'd love to get a look into." The toothy excited grin he gave the room was infectious. "So AAR, what did you do wrong?"

"We should've had our mediums and lights in close escort and chased the OPFOR down." Lieutenant Blake, in charge of Second Lance, stated decisively.

"Then you would have been dead, in short order." The voice was odd, but it was clearly female, and it came from the rear of the room. Everyone craned their necks to see the owner leaning against the rear wall, arms folded, wearing a figure flattering uniform that was clearly not GDI issue, and what a figure it was. Brox blinked as he connected the dots and inwardly groaned. "You would've caught up to us, but you had limited intel on the terrain, and I had another two Lances waiting for you in ambush positions."

"Ambassador... sorry, Commander McFarland, thank you for joining us. For your information, yes, she was the pilot of the ShadowHawk. She'd asked for an opportunity to keep her skills up to snuff and I saw this as the perfect opportunity to expose us to some unorthodox

fighting methodology that isn't just ye' olde giant robots facing off across a straightforward battlefield."

In spite of himself, Brox found his eyes rather glued to the woman as she walked, no, that was the wrong word... *glided* through the rows of seats towards the side of the podium. He shook himself and saw that almost all of the men in the room had done the same. Rumors being what they were amongst armed forces and men in particular, there was not a soldier, pilot, engineer or mechanic on base who hadn't heard of Lieutenant Weiss' experience in delivering the Ambassadorial invitation to her apartment in Port Krin.

Looking at her figure and especially her face, it made Brox wonder if the Canopians hadn't dabbled in a bit of secret genengineering during the late Star League era or perhaps during the chaos of the First Succession War, when the SLDF wasn't breathing down their necks anymore, and they still had access to their advanced med-tech. Oh, it wouldn't be as extensive engineering to call it a specific phenotype of humanity, catered to be a Mechwarrior or Aerospace pilot, such as it was among the Clans, but enough to produce a woman that basically radiated allure to a man's eyes and was probably 'enhanced for the bedroom' as well. Her clear skill in a Mech and her physicality as she walked showed that genes weren't everything. One thing he had learned as part of the Dark Caste and then living in the Sphere was that superior ability didn't guarantee success. It was a lesson that he longed to teach those damn arrogant Jade Falcons one day, painfully.

Brox then noticed that she had some sort of silvery and plastic device that was snaking out of her right ear, which further curled around her earlobe.

Dansel coughed with a slight smirk to bring the attention back to himself. "What should've happened in that situation, Lieutenant Blake, was that the Heavy Lance should've slowed their approach through the mountains more, and give the Sappers more time to do their job whilst your Light and Medium Lances protected them. The lead Lance wouldn't have walked into the trap blast zones at all, since there wouldn't have been traps in the first place. Then for all the damage Commander McFarland's forces were inflicting, she was taking too much damage in return and would've had to call on her

reserve Lances."

"Which I wouldn't have done, since I had to husband my assets for later fighting in the city," McFarland explained. "There is as much danger in moving too fast, as there is in moving too slowly. I also fought the battle on a psychological level. Put someone in an Assault Mech, and he or she will develop a certain entitlement or arrogance on the battlefield. It doesn't matter whether we are talking about an elite House Mechwarrior, a merc or a pirate, though the condition is worse in the latter two. They will think they are powerful, strong, or nigh invulnerable." Her manner turned arrogant, looking down her nose at the room. *"What possibly can these puny Mechs hope to accomplish against me?"*

"So she irritated you, ganged up on single mechs, poked and prodded," Dandel continued. "You couldn't pursue or couldn't unleash your full firepower in those mountains. You just wanted to get out of there and face them on open ground. She roped you right into a prepared kill zone. Boom. Just like that an entire Heavy Lance obliterated and the attack on the city blunted."

Brox tuned out the rest of the AAR as it wound down to specifics of individual performances. His mind rather occupied with the battle. He had long considered the merits of battling the way the Loders did it. For them, if it ever got to the point where a shot was fired, it was war to the knife with no rules, no formalities or bids.

He had read the two major works which they based their martial philosophy on; it was ancient even by Earth standards. The wisdom in it awed him and made him finally understand why the Motherlodgers scoffed and even ridiculed what War had become in the Sphere and the Clans. The first book, written by an ancient Chinese General that predated the Clans by millennia made them look like children merely playing at war.

Yet, here was a Periphery power who had, by necessity, rediscovered one of the tenants of martial wisdom. *Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush them.* Brox had the book in electronic format on his Tablet and read it every night. It felt like it would take a lifetime to properly understand.

"All right everyone that is all, if there are no further questions?
Dismissed."

The Battalion surged to their feet and started filling out of the Briefing Room. Brox remained behind and walked up to front where Dandel was speaking to the Commander. He stood at attention a polite distance away, waiting.

"Your *Atlas* would be really helpful for the Legion, Commander especially in a live OPFOR... sorry, Opposing Force exercise. We've never really fought against the true Assault Heavies as they're properly used."

"It would be my pleasure, Major Dandel, though I can't really bring the full potential of the *Atlas* to bear. Honestly, I trained and am more at home in a Medium, your *GMs* are a fine example. I would negotiate a purchase order for the Magistracy, but we are more interested in acquiring Heavies these days."

"There are a lot of companies on Motherlode that are looking to break into the Sphere market, Commander. They're gonna be looking for customers with Antallos as a point of sale. You could commission a design from them eventually."

"Then I will keep my new ear on the ground so to speak," she smiled dazzlingly, tapping what had to be some sort of sophisticated hearing aid. Now that Brox was closer he could see that it also snaked up into her hair and what had looked like a band to keep her hairdo in place was actually part of the hearing aid.

"Brox," Dandel acted as if he expected the burly Clanner to stay behind all along, "how good are you with a hundred tonner?"

He thought back to a different time, a much happier and ignorant time. He had taken the controls of a *Kodiak* during his upbringing in Clan Ghost Bear, as they had to test each model available to see which would fit him best. As it had turned out he found his 'destiny' in the lighter *Timber Wolf*, but he could well recall the handling of the *Kodiak* and the firepower it could bring to bear. An Inner Sphere

standard *Atlas* couldn't hold a candle to that, but the principles were the same. You were the eye of the storm, and the Father help anyone caught in it.

"Adequate," his voice box droned. Commander Mcfarland raised an eyebrow at him with a brief flash of surprise in her eyes at hearing the metallic tones of his voice.

"Excellent," Dansel clapped his hands together with a smirk on his face. "The OPFOR exercise is in three weeks. You've got that long to get yourself used to the Commander's *Atlas*."

Brox blinked at that order then reconsidered giving voice to his own request for a one-on-one battle against the Commander. Perhaps it would be better to wait on that and study her strategies and technique more, even see how well she did in some of his favorite sims.

"Do you have the time, Commander?" he droned.

"The Embassy is nearly done to spec, my only company now is a Magistracy Doctor who is too busy in the hospital and a local secretary I hired. My diplomatic duties are few and far between. Suffice it to say, I've a lot of free time all of a sudden. I have your contact information, and will send a message for when we can meet." She only nodded at him before exchanging polite salutes with Dansel and walked out.

Brox watched her leave and Dansel was particularly unabashed as he enjoyed the view. He stood next to the Clanner and nudged him conspiratorially with an elbow, "Have fun, Brox. Oh and please don't cause a diplomatic incident. She is an accredited Ambassador."

**Canopian Embassy, GDI Green Zone
Port Krin, Antallos
22nd January 2008/3023**

He put his finger on the portable scanner the GDI military police

officer offered him. There were four he could see in plain sight, looking extremely professional in their formal uniforms. Their faces were completely expressionless and dispassionate dark eyes surveyed Brox as if they were scanners themselves. His Foreign Legion ID card was examined again and briefly held against the scanner as well. The guard was satisfied at that point.

"You are expected," the guard's Chinese accented English was rather thick, but understandable. "Remember, that stepping through this gate you are on Canopian territory. Their laws apply on it, not the Coalition's."

"Understood."

The gate automatically opened itself at this point, he stepped over the threshold and into a little slice of paradise well hidden behind the fence and tall trees. The grass stretched like a carpet on the grounds around the building, which was stippled with smaller trees providing shade here and there, whilst banks of flowers stretched along the stone walkways. The embassy itself was a three floor affair that had clearly been refurbished and restored to look like it had during the Star League, with Canopian flavor. Said flavor involved statues and relief sculptures clinging to the facades of the building of distinct feminine figures of various types; angels, cupids, valkyries, circus performers and even entwined snakes around a staff. Some of them were enough to no doubt rather embarrass or perhaps even offend more inhibited visitors. The only 'ordinary' thing on the building was the Canopian seal.

He stopped at the main doors and pressed the prominent button to the side. There was a buzzing sound above him, an electromagnetic lock no doubt, and he twisted on the handle to enter an entrance hall. It was an area he imagined any visitor would be received in, soft couches lined the walls on one side, whilst a low table was set in front of it. To his left was a reception office with view of the hall, screened behind glass. A young woman was seated behind a desk with a computer. She was dressed in a knee length tight skirt and a blouse with a matching suit and square rimmed glasses over her blue eyes.

"Ah, you are Brox?" she asked unnecessarily in the local Antallos accent of English. He nodded anyway. The secretary emerged from her office and began to escort him through the embassy interior. It was still rather unfinished in certain areas, lacking the artwork and properly painted walls that were common in the majority of the embassy. Every door opened unlocked itself at the approach of the secretary. Not to mention it was damn confusing trying to keep track. It seemed the place was designed like a maze to disorient anyone unfamiliar with its layout, like an infiltrator or robber.

Finally the secretary paused outside another double door. "She is through here. You can go in." She left without a further word.

Brox shrugged and walked in.

It was a large room, with glass doors and windows looking out over the back garden which was spilling a lot of sunlight into the room. It looked like a place where the embassy could hold a large function for guests. There were no tables though making the room feel empty, and the artwork here were photo portraits of past Magestrixes. Ambassador McFarland was here, as was someone else.

Brox felt his mouth dry somewhat at what his eyes were seeing. She was lying face down on a cushioned table without a stitch of clothing or covering. Standing over her was a very muscular man wearing a shiny very tight piece of... underwear? And he was clearly giving the Ambassador a massage.

"Oh dear," she sighed in disappointment. "It seems we've over-run in our session, Carlos. Thank you, and please speak to Noreen for your payment."

Carlos the masseur only nodded before dressing himself in sweatpants and shirt from a nearby bag, and walking out the room via the glass doors. McFarland sighed again and propped herself up slightly on her elbows. Brox's traitorous eyes focused on the tantalizing view which was partly obstructed by her arms. "Do me a favor and hand me the dressing gown, please."

Brox had to tear his eyes away from her to see a wooden stand near

to the padded table that held a long silky gown. He wondered why his legs didn't work quite right as he walked towards it. By the time he had it in his hands she had stood but kept her back towards him. She had no hint of shame at all in her posture. She took the gown from him and tied it around herself before turning to face him properly.

"I apologize, Brox. I lose track of time when I get a massage from Carlos. He's very good."

Finally getting some coherency back in his mind and body, "I am ready to head to the Mech bay whenever you are."

"Business first indeed," she smiled at him mischievously. "Wait here, I'll be back."

She did her gliding walk again only this time adding a dash of hip sway.

Was she trying to seduce him? At Sibko, Clanners are taught about 'those' facts of life, and Brox had bedded his first during his late Sibko days, then a few women over the years during his time in the Dark Caste. But he had never found it to his liking here on Antallos or during his time as a merc prior to joining the Legion, always being too busy and focusing on always getting better at the skill and art of being a mechwarrior for that inevitable day when the Clans would return. Oh it was certainly a very pleasurable activity, but not a priority for him. Though he had to admit he couldn't deny that so far... he was interested in changing that.

Mcfarland returned, now wearing mid-thigh shorts and a white tank top that clung to her like a damn second skin and rugged boots adorned her feet while a belt held a holster for a TK auto pistol hung on her hips. She grinned, "Shall we?"

Given that she was an Ambassador, it surprised Brox that her Mech was kept within the civilian bay facilities in the city. The two Scavenger Lords' contingents for 'protecting' their embassies were housed within GDI secured areas, McFarland apparently either didn't want that or there was some other reason. The *Atlas* was in secure lockdown, kept within the gigantic gantries which framed it and allowed techs to work on it. There were none at present and the Mech itself was in good shape. He couldn't even see the typical scars that developed on Mechs over the decades from armor repairs of battle scars, it was either damn good repair work or the thing hadn't seen many battles. The Mech also had a nice desert camouflage paint job that looked to be brand new.

He saw immediately the first after-market modification that she had made. A normal *Atlas* had two rear facing Medium Lasers, to protect from speedier Mechs managing to get behind it. These had been removed and replaced onto the arms, giving it a total of four forward facing Lasers. Combined with the Deathgiver Autocannon, and it made for alpha strike damage potential at close range that he would think twice of facing in an Omnimech.

She went up the ladder first, putting Brox in a bit of a conundrum. Wait for her to finish climbing then go, or climb immediately and enjoy what would no doubt be a very nice view. He huffed in frustration at his indecision. '*As Dansel would say, 'Screw it.'*' He put his hands to the rungs and followed.

McFarland gave him a knowing smile as they stood on the gantry, now level with the *Atlas*' infamous head.

Brox coughed uncomfortably, "Any other modifications besides the Lasers?"

"I stripped out the Ground to Orbit Com Gear to make more room in the cockpit, since it had to be my home away from home while I was prospecting. Kept the dish obviously, linked that to the standard com gear. Other than that, it's a standard."

She pulled open an armored panel next to the entry hatch, exposing a

small keypad. A moment later the hatch opened and she climbed in. Brox followed and saw what she meant. It was rather roomy, still had a small stove on one side, and empty shelves and storage compartments. She took the pilot's seat and her hands began to push in access codes before putting on the neurohelmet. The fusion engine beneath them rumbled into life.

She held out her hand, "You have your profile?" Brox handed the small data cube over. It was another two minutes before she handed over the neurohelmet and vacated the chair. "Okay, you're an authorized pilot, but you don't have full weapon privileges yet."

He nodded in understanding. It wasn't as if they were going to use them for real in this session. He had to shift the chair back for comfort as the HUD flashed into being and he started the full power up sequence. His hands grasped the unfamiliar control sticks. McFarland awkwardly put a radio headset over her hearing aid. "Bay control, this is Mech four niner delta, requesting release and opening of bay doors."

"Verify," the bored voice crackled over the radio.

She leaned over, forcing Brox to shift back into the chair, so she could access the radio control board and type in another key combination and word passphrase.

"Received, and verified. Disengaging gantries, bay doors opening. No weapons are to be powered up within Port Krin city limits."

She rolled her eyes, "Understood, Bay control."

Brox concentrated and pushed on the controls. The *Atlas* took one step forwards, then another. He did a three sixty turn on the spot, then a step backwards and forwards. The Mech responded smoothly in basic movement at least. Soon enough the *Atlas* emerged from the Mech bays and into the hot Antallos sun.

"Okay, so far so good, Brox. You know the routes out of the city from here?"

"Yes," he sped up to full walking pace. He also saw that they were drawing some attention from the civilian population. They saw Mechs walking every day on these routes, but the *Atlas'* fearsome visage was a sight that was not at all common on Antallos.

"So how did you pick that injury up?" Brox couldn't exactly tell her that he had lost his voice during his failed Trial of Position in Clan Ghost Bear. The Coalition was understandably keeping the knowledge of Kerensky's Descendants very close to the chest. She grimaced and looked away, "Sorry, if it's too painful to talk about..." Brox had to give her credit; she was good at reading body language. He had thought he was controlling his reaction well.

"It was an injury in an important Mech battle. I lost and because of that... I lost something precious."

Her eyes had a near frightening look of understanding in them. "Not just your normal life."

"Yes," he looked at her directly, "and yours?"

"A common enough story for anyone in the Periphery, pirate attack. I almost wish I lost my hearing for something more significant than a few pieces of lostech."

"But now you've got it back."

"Yes, though I doubt just because you've got your voice back, that all's forgiven and forgotten."

Brox nodded in agreement with the sentiment and decided to push the speed up to forty. He'd forgotten just how much of a slowpoke an Assault Mech could be. "You fight well."

"And your reaction times are impressive," she countered with a smile. "You made me really work to apply the *lǐngchí*."

"Lingchi?"

"Capellan term, death by a thousand cuts," she explained. "It's a way

of equalizing opponents of disparate strength. Very difficult to do normally, but made easier if you have favorable terrain, and would be even easier if we could just resurrect extended range laser tech one day. In any event, we Canopians have had to learn to do this very well."

Brox had always wondered how a Periphery state like the Magistracy had survived the hell of the Succession Wars. He finally had an answer if McFarland was any indication of the warriors that came out of their armed forces, though it also helped that the fractious Free Worlds League was their primary antagonist, which was both a blessing and a curse.

When they had finally cleared Port Krin outskirts and semi-arid terrain stretched before them, he finally stretched the *Atlas* into a max speed run. She leaned over him again and a few button taps later, "You can practice with the weapons now, but they're in training mode."

Brox grinned in anticipation, "Then let's see what this thing can really do."

Reconnaissance Office
GDI Compound
27th January 2008/3023

He wearily rubbed his eyes and regarded the large room filled with light tables and stacks upon stacks of A1 sized satellite imagery of Antallos. Jonathan Joyce cursed his luck that he had drawn the short straw in the graveyard shift manual review of the latest recon run done of the various city-states on the planet. He really wished that the IT gurus back home could get a move on with cracking some sort of BT neural net architecture module that they could use for this.

As much as visual recognition analysis programming had advanced by leaps and bounds in scanning satellite photographs for 'suspicious things and activity' it still missed things that only a human could

recognize. Therefore they were still reliant on good old human brain for image interpretation, and they were still forced to review anything the computer flagged as sometimes the things could still misinterpret.

He put on his glasses with a sigh and pulled the next image from the pile. He noted the time, date and coordinate location it was taken before starting from the top right, moving his eyes slowly to the left, before repeating. Using his eyes much like printer would move across a page. He was so intent on going through the motions of his job, that his eyes slid right over it, before his brain slammed on the brakes.

"Hello there," his eyes narrowed on the spot. He took a magnifying glass to it, took off his glasses and put his eyes right against it. "Interesting." Jonathan stood and took the next photo in the time series, with his mind knowing what to look for, he found it much easier this time. He pushed the magnifier to it. "Fuck."

He pulled the next photo, "Bloody hell."

The photo after that finally caused him to reach for the telephone.

**2820 Km South East of Hermantown
Antallos, Coalition of Sovereign Nations
29th January 2008/3023**

The GDI Dropship Gray Area appeared out of the clear blue sky overlooking the rough semi-arid terrain. The pillar of her fusion engine burn echoed a deep rumble throughout the area as the egg shaped vessel throttled against gravity to achieve her optimum landing velocity. A large patch of flat sand was promptly glassed as the Gray Area descended the last few hundred meters of altitude and extended its landing struts. The thrust pushed outward now and caused a small sandstorm that partially obscured the vessel as it thumped on its struts.

Inside his *BattleMaster*, Brox felt the familiar lurch of landing and the

bay doors started to open immediately. The early morning sun pierced into the bay and the Mech debarkation ramp extended.

Jankowski was the first to pilot his *BattleMaster* out after which Brox took his own turn, and not five minutes later the entire Command Lance was in formation around the *Gray Area*. Radar and Drone recon pretty much confirmed that there were no surprises out here for them, but it was good practice and besides which Brox wouldn't believe there was no enemy until his own eyes and Mech sensors told him so.

Major Dansel's voice crackled over the radio, "Hulk to Gray Area Actual, we are clear out here. No hostiles confirmed."

"Understood, package being released."

Brox saw new friendly contacts appear on his screens from the Dropship. Two eight-wheeled APCs roared onto the desert and like a perfectly coordinated group dance the Command Lance fell into escort formation with it as they headed further south at a sustained fifty kph.

"Are we sure this is what it seems to be?" Natalie questioned.

"This is no invasion force, Ladybug."

"I get that, but while we could eat their five escort Mechs for breakfast, there's no telling what they have in that convoy. I could stuff a lot of explosive in those twelve vehicles that's coming up the road."

"Intelligence rates that possibility as very low," Dansel pointed out, "but keep your fingers near your triggers."

"If it happens, it happens," Brox grumbled.

"Drone overflights puts our guests at fifteen minutes ETI. So... Nameless, I hear you've got a date."

Brox could practically hear the Major's suggestive winking through

the radio. "Yeah. So what? And where did you hear that from?" Lady Carmela had been rather circumspect in asking him to dinner, doing so just after another training session in her *Atlas*.

"Well, as your Commanding officer, she felt obliged to inform me that you might not be in barracks on the evening in question."

Brox groaned as all a manner of jeering and wolf whistles suddenly assaulted him over the radio.

"Make sure you pick up the tab, Nameless," advised Jankowski.

Dansel laughed, "Given the restaurants she'll frequent Wonderboy, I think they'd have to go Dutch."

Von Braun said seriously, "Bring condoms just in case. I have spares..."

Brox made a personal note to absolutely thrash his comrades in the next one-on-one combat sim tourney. The Division usually had a pool of money riding on the winner – they'd burn and pay for any possible future dates he might have in the process.

"Ignore them, Nameless," Lady Natalie advised earnestly. "I think you two would make a cute couple."

"Can the chatter, boys and girls," Dansel ordered seriously. "Contacts."

Brox noticed them too, just entering extreme detection range of his *BattleMaster's* sensors. The DI computer had them currently colored in yellow, reflecting their neutral status and no IFF signal and just like Intel had indicated, a dozen strong convoy of large vehicles with two Mechs riding on the flanks, two on point duty and a tail-end Charlie. The MFD changed to display probable data on what kind of Mechs they were facing; the heaviest seemed to be an *Ostroc*, while the rest were a hodgepodge of various Mediums. The wheeled vehicles had no obvious weapons but long range enhanced imagery indicated they were almost all refit ICE, with armor plates rather crudely welded on and gun slits on some of the trucks.

"Safety all weapons! They're flying a flag of truce."

Brox startled at that sudden order from the Major and focused his imagery, sure enough on the top of each vehicle was a fluttering white flag, even the Mechs had them rather comically poking up from the top of their heads.

He slammed his fist into the armrest of his seat in frustration, "By the Father, what does it take to get a decent battle around here!"

**Ambassador Smith's Office,
Port Krin, Antallos,
Coalition of Sovereign Nations
31st January 2008/3023**

"You're serious?"

"Yes," General Hui Guo, Commander GDI on Antallos declared shortly. "The convoy consists of delegations representing Hottown, SouthSea City, Port James, Digger's Stop and Malice Fist."

Smith leaned back into his chair and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. "So they saw the writing on the wall."

Hui nodded, "There's also the matter that any trade these cities had with those that recently fell to us had been severed. The iron mines of Kronkite were especially responsible in causing this."

Smith picked up his tablet and opened up his main Antallos file, he slid his fingers repeatedly on it to browse to the relevant section. This file was essentially a compilation of both sourcebook knowledge and what conventional Intelligence had gathered on the rest of the planet.

Hottown was aptly named; it was within sight of an active Volcano and apparently had a spectacular view of the mountain ranges down there. It was home to a Star League era geothermal plant that

provided power to the fifty thousand residents there, with water provided by snow runoff and a small aluminum mine.

The most contrary city in the list was Malice Fist. The name let you imagine that the worst depredations occurred there, and this was certainly true during the chaos of the First Succession War, but it had cleaned up its act slightly over the centuries and especially recently with a change to a new leadership, though it was still a hotbed of all sorts of slavery. Its primary export was lumber and rubber from the massive equatorial forests. Both Port James and SouthSea City were essentially fish producers, who worked the South Eastern Sea for their catch, while Digger's Stop held another mining community that worked a very unproductive and shallow gold mine.

Smith's eyes were appreciative, "If we can bring these people into the fold and secure domestic trade, it'd certainly help in getting us more self-sufficient. Not to mention alleviate the food supply problems in Hermantown."

"It'll also certainly free up tonnage on the Command Circuit for more military assets to be transported. The new build tanks we need are only trickling in at the moment."

"When will the delegations arrive?"

"Not for another four days."

"Why so long?"

Hui frowned with irritation, "They rather bluntly refused our offer of a Dropship ride."

"Probably trying to make a statement," Smith sighed wearily.

"Showing independence and that while they're coming to us bearing gifts, it's actually a shrewd move for their current leaderships to stay in place."

"Which will only last until their people regain their rightful power," Hui sneered. Smith only nodded stoically at that statement. General Hui was certainly a more forceful character than Davis had ever

been. The cleanups of the four hostile city-states had proceeded more swiftly and when the worst slavers and murderers had been convicted, there had been no objections from the General when the people of those cities had demanded the convicts face firing squads.

"Well, we better get our ducks in order. Thank you for the brief, General."

**Outskirts of Port Krin, Antallos,
Coalition of Sovereign Nations
3rd February 2008/3023**

"We've done three drone over flights, at high and low altitude, General. LADAR and Terahertz shows all clear so far for biological and chemical, three of the vehicles are fusion powered, but no other radiological sources. So unless they cleaned up really well – which I doubt - and without doing a physical search, they're provisionally pose no threat."

"Thank you Lieutenant, dismissed," Hui took off his cap and threaded his fingers through his short black hair as the young American technician retreated. He flicked the gathered sweat off his fingers and onto the hot sand. *'You've gone soft,'* Guo berated himself. There had been a time when such conditions and heat would've hardly fazed him at all. The good old days of being a Captain where he could've marched for dozens of kilometers, eating very little, and having no more worries than what his infantry company was up to were long gone.

No longer did he walk the corridors of politics that was the upper-echelons of the PLA, and for that he was part grateful and part resentful. His assignment to head GDI ANTCOM had come in the wake of the long put off reshuffling of China's military – following the disastrous Siberian War. No longer did the military sit next to ministers in politburo meetings. Now there was just one top representative of the PLA that sat in the State Council, while the Generals now only met in the Central Military Commission. In the

end, it turned out that things were just a bit too top-heavy in Beijing, and Hui had found himself getting orders to take provisional command of the Shenyang Military Region.

And then as if fate had been waiting, the week after he had settled in his new post, the first Pirate Invasion occurred. The fantastic, ludicrous, yet true news arrived that the entire world, plus fifty odd light years of space had been transported into the Universe of some old Western boardgame that he had never even heard of. Then the frenetic preparation to ready the world for the Second Invasion – he had held his breath that day as he watched the enemy Dropships ride the nuclear gauntlet that had been prepared for them, and saw how a Dropship had been angling directly for *his* district. It had landed in Japan instead, but it was a close thing. He had been disappointed initially, capturing such a prize would've been a boon for China, but then the images of destruction that the pirates caused all over the world and the casualties they had inflicted on military forces had dispelled that feeling quickly.

The establishment of the GDI followed and soon Hui found himself called to President Zhang Han Sen's office in Beijing. He faced a small inquisition on his defense plans for the Shenyang District – where unlike the majority of his colleagues in district command - he had actually done research on the 'Battletech sourcebooks' and adjusted his plans accordingly. A month later he was on a plane to the United States to become one of the first senior Chinese officers in the GDI.

He brought himself back to the present and narrowed his eyes at the slowly approaching worm of dust in the far distance, crawling its way up the southern road. The escorting City-State BattleMechs were as big as his thumb if he aimed it at them and were slowly growing. He put his hand on the solid bulk of the MBT next to him and the rest of its squadron arrayed beyond, with a company of GDI Mechs behind them. It was all meant to impress, but he also wanted to show the 'leaders' a little taste of what could be kicking down their doors quite soon if they didn't 'play nice'.

The MBT popped its hatch and its commander looked down, "Sir, it's time."

Hui nodded and walked towards his ride. He climbed into the rear hatch of the M1130CVB *Stryker* and surveyed the six operators at their various stations before taking an empty seat. His eyes focused on the one large screen which could display real-time feeds from any unit, field camera or sensor linked into the Battlernet.

"What's their distance?"

"Nine clicks and closing, General."

"Artillery?"

"We're ready to turn them all into shrapnel at your order, Sir."

"Tell the Major he's clear to proceed."

Twelve armored Humvees roared onto the southern road and drove to meet the approaching City States delegation. They were also flying flags of truce and largely ignored the road, with only two of their number driving on it, whilst the rest were arrayed along their flanks in a v formation. Due to their higher speed they arrived at the rendezvous point first. It was another nine minutes before the guests arrived within spitting distance of the Humvees.

"Give me their feed," Hui ordered.

The screen changed to show lead Humvee's feed, and just in time to see Major Silberman come into view. The doors of the city-state vehicles opened and eight people stepped out of them and approached. Hui could not imagine a weirder assemblage of humanity.

"Some of 'em look like they could've walked off the set of Mad Max," one of the techs muttered incredulously.

Hui coughed pointedly and the Sergeant quickly shut up, though he didn't particularly blame him for the reaction. Six men and two women; they mostly wore dusty clothes of leathers, with crudely put together body armor sewn onto the parts of the body which needed no flexibility.

"I don't think they dress like this normally," another tech pointed out. "The journey here is long and those nomadic marauder bands are a clear threat to travelers, especially on this road – hence the body armor."

Soon enough, Hui saw the Major gesturing to the Humvees and the City-State delegation entered the vehicles, "So far so good." The delegation had agreed that they would at least enter Port Krin using GDI vehicles, but they hadn't been enthusiastic about the idea. Hui on the other hand had insisted on it during the negotiations over the radio, and the City-States were not in a position to really refuse.

**Iggy's Bar, Port Krin, Antallos,
Coalition of Sovereign Nations
6th February 2008/3023**

'In breaking news. After three straight days of negotiation on the part of Coalition Ambassador Smith, a preliminary agreement has been reached which will see trade not only resuming with the 'Southern Cities Group' - as they are calling themselves – but actually increased to surpass pre-liberation levels. The SCG has agreed to enact reforms which will see slavery abolished, new civil services introduced and the right to political discourse and self-determination for their people. GDI will also have basing rights out of these cities...'

Brox turned away from the large flatpanel display in the corner of the bar and stared into his beer. At least it looked like Lexicon and Blueston of the western City-States were stupidly spoiling for a fight, given the sudden rhetoric and threats they were sending via radio into Coalition territory. Hopefully they would have something in the hardware department to back their bold words. The four remaining western cities were all curiously silent and while his personal preference would be to eventually go to each and *'bash in some skulls and take names'*, it would probably not turn out that way.

Master Sergeant Lindsay Graham sat down next to him with his own beer, "Brox you really shouldn't be drinking yet, don't want to get sloshed before your date even begins."

"I will be fine," Brox dismissed the concern, tugging his collar. The clothes he was wearing had been delivered to his quarters, courtesy of the Lady Carmela herself. It was most decidedly a new experience dressing like he was some rich noble. The shirt hardly felt like it was there, so soft was the material and the suit, pants and shoes were nearly void black and clearly new.

"Got everything?"

Brox sighed explosively and resisted the urge to do some form of bodily harm to the next member of the Division who offered him 'help', "Money, condoms, phone, and no I will not bring any handcuffs or other 'equipment'."

"You never know Brox," Graham declared sagely, "she might be into that sort of thing. Better be prepared, just in case." Brox did not dignify that with a response. "So where are you two going?"

"I don't know, she just said that she would meet me here."

"Well, Iggy's is near the food district, so..."

"Tell the Hulk that he dare not follow me or I will be... *displeased*."

"Uh, what makes you think..."

Brox just gave Graham a flat look in response.

"Righty 'O, I think I'll be going."

Brox could swear that the Sergeant had left a trail of dust so fast had he left, even leaving his beer behind. "Thanks," he grabbed the large glass mug of ale to join his own and glanced at the clock.

Lady Carmela arrived fifteen minutes later, and stunned the bar into silence. Brox didn't have much thought beside the fact that this vision

of a woman had chosen his rough self to spend an evening with. Her red dress was a tasteful yet incredibly sultry, its length was all the way down to her ankles, but was slitted to expose her left leg to just above mid-thigh, and was completely backless.

She threaded her arm through his with a smile and they left the bar – outside was a waiting Humvee, with a two GDI guards he recognized from the Embassy.

"Shall we?"

Brox couldn't help but stare and drink in the sight of her in the evening, "Let's go."

GDI Foreign Legion Lounge
Port Krin, Antallos
01 May 3022

Dansel stormed into the room, throwing off the more formal parts of his uniform as he crashed into a couch. "I'm doomed" he pronounced with all the dramatic flair of any Herald of the Apocalypse.

Hale and Al Azim were going over some of Tony's paperwork while getting lunch and watched with some amusement at Major Dansel's arrival and proclamation. They knew he had been summoned to the General's office, but didn't know why. "What are you talking about this time, Tony? Brox catch you cheating? Again?" Hale offered a reply to Tony in an off-hand manner.

"Oh! If only it were that simple! No, I just got out of that meeting with Davis. He was updating me on the status of the garrison, and certain orders for specific people." He rose from his prone position, still sitting on the couch, now surveying the room to see who was present. "About three quarters of the garrison is being rotated back to Earth for training and what-not. The Legion is staying with the other quarter in order to act as a core to get the new people up to speed on how war is fought in the Inner Sphere."

"That doesn't sound like the end of the world. Unless you have an ex in the new arrivals?" Alladin offered his own reply while pondering the effect this would have on the Legion, who would suddenly become very senior in the local pecking order. While most of his people would not abuse their positions, there would always be some bad apples.

"Oh, hardy har har." Dansel shook his head. "Nope. Colonel Kurita is being assigned to the Embassy being sent to the Combine, and Davis is being rotated back to do whatever the hell it is they do when they aren't in the field. Politics maybe. And golf. Can't forget the golf. I was told to tell you guys that we're getting a General Hui Go and a Major Enis İbrahim to replace them. Never heard of them though, so their files will be on your desks by the end of the day."

At that, the two people who really ran the Foreign Legion put down the papers they had in front of them. "That is news, my friend" Aladdin said as he ran the names over in his head. Ibrahim was a very Muslim name, and the Free Azami would be sure to take it as a sign of favor from the Motherloders.

Hale's thoughts went on a different route. With those two going back to Earth, that meant the two most experienced officers in the GDI would be him and Al Azim. That would be... an interesting balancing act to say the least. But he's had to break in higher ranked officers before, so he wasn't completely out of the loop. "They keeping Ambassador Smith on Antallos?"

Dansel nodded. "Yep. But that's not the worst of it. No, there are things I was told that made my blood run cold. Horrors from beyond the farthest stars." His voice dropped down to echo his fears made manifest.

"Oh, come on Tony. What's so bad?" Al Azim shook his head, once again disapproving of the theatrics of the legendary Motherloder.

"Oh! You're being sent back home too! Apparently something about the Hajj, or that Arabian Princess who sends you letters every couple weeks." Tony poked humorously at the running politically arranged courtship between the Colonel and a certain highly placed daughter back on Earth. It hadn't progressed beyond casual letters as far as casual snooping had found, and a respectful request prevented the majority of the prying into Aladdin's private affairs.

At least Al Azim had the grace to look aghast at the comment. "Major Dansel, when you are engaged in an intellectually and culturally stimulating discourse, you may then have the wherewithal to criticize. Until then..." He let his voice trail off.

"But you get off lucky! No, it's about me! It's horrible! Terrible! I didn't sign on for this!" Tony flailed his hands above his head in a show about how much he disliked what he wasn't talking about. By this time, other Legion members had stopped what they were doing to listen in with various degrees of subtlety.

Hale harrumphed. "And what could possibly be so horrible?"

"What will my family think? My Mother? She'll disown me for sure!" Tony took a breath to calm himself, then glared with severe intensity at Hale. "No... They got to you already. They would have had to..." He jumped up and pointed an accusatory finger at Hale with all the drama of an Oscar Winner. "No! I don't want to go to Officer School! SOMEONE SAVE ME!"

Classified Location, Earth
Sol System, Grantville Cluster
03 May 3022

The people who had been meeting in this room for the past couple months had gotten to know each other fairly well – for professional spooks. Three of them came from Russia, Israel and Switzerland. They were the ones who had worked hard at designing the general design of the new breed of CSN embassy to be used in other interstellar nations.

Of course, they also knew that their work would never be publicly recognized, but such was the life in their chosen profession.

The fourth person was different. He was from the British Isles, and was one of those rare people with a unity of skills, interests and high enough security clearance to flesh out the team. While the other three were professionals in the realm of electronics, hidden observation, counter-surveillance and a host of other special technical skills, this last man had none of that. He was an architect, and his job was to make everything *look good*.

They were standing around the final scale model of the proposed embassy. They had been given sundry details like the footprint of the land they were being granted on Luthien, as well as utility hook-ups and the outlines of adjacent embassies for comparison and had built their own design with these factors in mind.

Sure, the politicians and diplomats could give some input, but at the end of it all, it was these four people that made the decisions that all

would have to live with. And they were rightly proud of their work.

The Luthien Embassy was a five story building, plus two basement levels. The bottommost was storage and utilities, the one above it a small parking garage with a toolshop in the back. Diplomatic cars were being provided by Mercedes-Benz, four electric vehicles built to the same defensive standards as the Popemobile and other heads of state. The first floor held an open lobby with room for a museum of Motherlode history. Although for now that particular exhibit would be closed off from the public. There would also be some offices for use by lesser functionaries.

Second and third floors were residential, including a two story cafeteria with bay windows made of custom cut ferroglass - normally used in Mech cockpits - looking out the front of the building. The structural weakness was accepted for the morale of the people in the building, and the interior walls would be reinforced and armored in case of breaches. The cafeteria could also be converted into a formal dining area should such events ever come about. And the four people were told that they would happen.

The fourth floor was for more storage, and the working offices of the Intel division; secure and safe rooms given at least five layers of security. The top floor held the more official diplomatic offices, including rooms more suitable to the hosting of top foreign officials.

The roof was given over to two major functions. The front two thirds was designed to be a garden, small bushes, shrubs and flowers in addition to a nice Italian fountain. Meetings could be held up there, where the wind through the flora and the water flowing would form a decent white-noise generator. In addition, some fruits and vegetables were slated to have their own section, providing for some fresh food to spice up the local cuisine. The other third included a large array of solar panels as well as equipment better served being on the roof rather than in the basement.

The outside was done in a combination of European and Japanese sensibilities reminiscent of the Anglo-Japanese style in England during the late 1800's. It was hoped that the aesthetic would impress upon their hosts that they were respectful of the Combine while at

the same time letting them know that the CSN was still a separate political entity.

Now all they had to do was get all the vital pieces built on Earth so they could be shipped to Luthien. Not after the Cold War was any Earth nation going to trust someone else to build their embassy.

**Meeting Room, Draconis Combine Embassy
Port Krin, Antallos
17 May 3022**

Colonel Chou Kurita walked his fingers through the decently sized folder he had been given by Ambassador Taro, who was sitting across from him, doing her own paperwork. In his hands was a highly detailed and intricate extract from the policies of the Combine on how one was to act when interacting with the Coordinator. It was one of the necessary evils of politics, but one that everyone on both sides of the diplomatic table on Antallos knew was something they couldn't afford to screw up.

There were listings for proper etiquette, dress code, whom he should defer to and who would defer to him. It was a lot for the Naval Officer to take in, despite growing up in a similar culture. Well, not to similar, Chou reminded himself. His home nation of Japan and the Draconis Combine held as much in common as the Meiji period and modern Japan. It was sad, in a way, to see how far they had fallen due to the ravages of war and time. Of course, the thought went both ways, he was sure. The Combine probably felt that the lost Motherloders had little in the way of conventional civilization.

Ambassador Smith had received word that the CSN had finished putting together a Dropship with the embassy prefabricated to the needs of the duty as well as a staff set up for a 6 to 12 month rotation. Similar efforts were being put together for the other adjacent nations, but the lack of lift capacity and the invitation by Takashi Kurita himself meant that the Combine got the first Embassy. They would be leaving at the end of the month.

Chou was being sent for his interview with the Coordinator, then he

would return back to Earth for training and a new assignment. Smith had also assured Chou that Emperor Akihito had arranged for a proper present for Coordinator Kurita. It had been decided at higher levels that the existence of a proper ruler on the Chrysanthemum Throne would not be a good idea to reveal at this time, and Chou wasn't about to argue with the diplomats on that decision.

He turned his thoughts back to the preparation in front of him, hoping that Taro hadn't seen the momentary distraction. A quick glance confirmed that wasn't the case.

Spaceport, Port Krin Antallos 31 May 3022

There were two separate comings and goings this day. The first was the first proper rotation of forces between Motherlode and Antallos for the GDI. Men and Women who had spent far to long away from home making their sad farewells to those staying behind until the next command circuit in two weeks, while greeting officially and unofficially their replacements. General Davis and General Hui Go exchanged the official relieving of position formalities before the armed forces and press, while Colonel Kurita met with his own replacement for a quick briefing, informing him of some of the immediate issues that needed resolving in addition to some facts that didn't appear in official reports.

Off in the background, Tony marched onto a waiting Dropship hoping to avoid the worst of it all.

Once all that was done, Chou met with Ambassador Smith and the staff of the Luthien Embassy. They held their meeting on the diplomatic *Union* after the Combine legal team had disembarked along with many repatriated citizens whom had escaped piracy charges back on Earth and the entire ship had been swept for any leftover bugs.

"No Mechs?" Chou asked as they sat around the conference table near the top of the Dropship.

"No." Ambassador Miguel Carlos de Borbon was a son of Mexican and Spanish football players, and had spent most of his childhood moving from nation to nation. At seven languages and a good deal of charisma, he had applied for the Luthien position and was granted it. Some detractors felt that the CSN was pandering to Latin America with that choice, but could only keep to rumors at this point. "Heavy armed forces were considered, but dismissed due to logistical concerns. We're keeping with special forces and light vehicles for the most part, even if only to keep up the pretense that we're a backwater neo-barbarian state with delusions of lostech greatness."

Chou raised an eyebrow at that. "Am I supposed to keep that line myself?"

"If it comes up? No. Do try and present us in the best light. We'll let the Combine make their own assumption without us helping them along too much, thank you."

Chou nodded at that, beginning to develop some sense for diplomatic double-speak. "I heard that Chandy is coming with us from Tai-sa Ulysses. Is that true?"

The captain of the Dropship nodded. "Yes. He and some of his people are offering the use of their Jumpships on the trip, in exchange for berths on our ship. There were no objections from the higher-ups, and we were given instructions to play nice with the Kurita given his future potential as an ally against ComStar and the Word of Blake."

Chou was vaguely surprised at that. He had met the Combine businessman a couple times while dealing with the factory, and held a very neutral impression of the man. "So we're playing host to an important Kurita to score favor with him and the Combine."

"Pretty much." The captain looked at the clock. "I have to get going, check on things. We'll be lifting off tomorrow morning to meet up with the Jumpship that will start our trip to Luthien, and I want everything shipshape and stowed before then."

Colonel Kurita knew that morning would come far too soon.

Nadir Jumpoint
Luthien, Capital of the Draconis Combine
18 August, 3022

It was one of Chandy's Jumpships that made the last leg of the two-and-a-half month journey of the Coalition diplomats. The journey was made in relative peace, the worse being a false report of a pirate raid a jump away.

At the point, the Jumpship began to pull in closer to Luthien's primary, and the Coalition Dropship detached, and with flightplan filed with the local space control. On the bridge of the Dropship, Chou waited to one side with Ambassador de Borbon. "We should be taking notes." Chou whispered as he watched the captain and navigator negotiate a path through the mass of ships coming and going. "This is one of the major worlds, and they've had plenty of time to streamline the process of controlling the comings and goings of Jump- and Dropships."

de Borbon's response was cut short when the navigator started yelling in his native Maori mixed with English. Something about 'idiot drivers'. "Maybe not", Chou changed his opinion slightly. Ten days of travel, and it looked like there were still occasional traffic jams.

Imperial City Spaceport
Luthien, Draconis Combine
28 August, 3022

Monroe Salvadore-Kurita was a middle aged man who was seriously contemplating finding a nice monastery to retire too. This entire scenario was just preposterous. Him, playing nice with some deep perhiphery Neo-Barb nation that happened to have some lostech trinkets and some small skill at killing pirates? And they were granted such honors as this?

He we quite certain that this 'Kurita' from Motherlode was nothing more than a name chosen to invoke the favor of the glorious Dragon.

He spat on the ground, careful to aim away from the man standing beside him.

Jerry Akuma, adjunct to Warlord Samsanov of the Galedon District, stood beside the ambassador, sharing in his misery. He was one of those who supported his master's bid to conquer Antallos, and, from there, Motherlode for its treasures. But the will of the Coordinator was clear and absolute in this regard. This did not stop him from helping to plan out certain 'contingencies', but Akuma was sent to this duty by Samsanov for his own inscrutable purposes.

Monroe didn't care for that. He just wanted to get back inside and get some nice tea. And a young boy to serve him. Yes, both would do nicely. At least the neo-barbs had enough sense to admit to the might of the Combine when the message had come along that they were not bringing any BattleMechs with them, only a nominal infantry security force and a couple of armored vehicles.

His own aide, whose name escaped him, put down a radio set and reported that the Coalition Dropship was on its final approach to the spaceport, and gently pointed out the direction from which it was coming from, handing the Ambassador and Akuma a pair of binoculars.

The Dropship was obviously a *Union*, but it looked brand new for the most part. Monroe frowned as he found that he couldn't find a defect with the ship as it throttled back its fusion engines to a safe landing speed. The Bronze Eagle that was the symbol of their military was small and subservient to the symbol of the Coalition, an unsubtle reminder that the military was ruled by the politicians, rather than having a proper say in the affairs of their two-world state.

He had received the reports from Chandrasekhar Kurita that he had made along the return trip from Antallos as was due his station. The improper Kurita had words of praise for the industry of the Motherloders, and approved wholeheartedly of the plan to bring the Coalition into the Combine through diplomatic and economic means. A piece of trash that Monroe would expect from a Kurita who couldn't pilot a BattleMech.

But one thing overrode his personal desire to drive these barbarians away from the beautiful and powerful Luthien. With his appointment, he had seen the ideal end goal of all this diplomatic kowtowing to these upstarts. A new District for the Combine that held the northern border of the Outworlds Alliance, one that bordered the Galedon District, and would serve to be the first major expansion of the Combine in over a century. A coup that would ensure that the glorious Coordinator would be remembered as a paragon of the position.

And Monroe wanted to be part of that. So he swallowed his bile as the diplomatic *Union* finally settled down into its designated position and waited patiently for it to be safe for him to approach.

He didn't have to wait long, as the ever-efficient workers of the spaceport quickly hosed down the landing platform, sending a small cloud of steam into the air. Monroe and Jerry, along with their people, quickly approached the *Union* in their groundcars, as walking the distance would take too long, and neither of them felt like it.

The landing bay doors to the Dropship opened up on the side facing the approaching Combine diplomats, revealing a crowded cargo bay filled to the brim with equipment and cargo pallets. Aligned at the entrance, and now descending to meet the Combine ambassadors as was proper, were several men and women, led by two that Monroe recognized as Tai-Sa Chou Kurita and Ambassador de Borbon. Chandrasekhar was visible, but to the back to allow for the proper greetings.

de Borbon approached Salvadore-Kurita and provided him with the proper greetings as well as a rolled up scroll that was signed by Tai-sa Ulysses Kurita and made the entire thing a very official and very formal declaration that, yes, this was an official embassy, there to make communications easier with the Glorious Dragon. It was all right and proper, and Monroe was glad that even a failure like Chandrasekhar could teach these neo-barbs a thing or two about how to treat their betters.

To the side of the civilian diplomats, Chou and Jerry saluted each other, and offered their own less ornate, but still very formal

greetings. "Colonel Chou Kurita, Global Defense Initiative of the Coalition."

"Sho-sa Jerry Akuma, DCMS, adjunct to Warlord Grieg Samsanov of the Galedon District."

Chou suppressed his surprise. Jerry Akuma was mentioned in the source material as a loyal aide to Samsanov during the attempted destruction of the Wolf's Dragoons and died during that conflict. To see him here was unusual, but given the rampant butterflies that the presence of Earth had created, things like this were bound to happen.

Still, meeting someone that he could easily believe was one of the more vile men in the Combine set off some warning bells in his head. At de Borbon's direction, he greeted the actual Combine Ambassador, presenting the invitation from Coordinator Kurita. Salvadore-Kurita examined the paper with a critical eye, before finally returning it to Chou, accepting it as real.

Both Chou and Miguel felt that if Monroe could have torn up the paper and spit in their face, he would have. But diplomacy was the rule of the meeting, not warfare, so Monroe coldly welcomed them to Luthien, and bid they enjoy the hospitality of the greatest world in the Inner Sphere bar none.

Diplomatic Stateroom

CSN *Union-Class Dropship Olympus*

Same Day

Jerry didn't like being shown up. He knew that the Motherloaders held secrets of Lostech computer technology, technology that rightly belonged to his master, Grieg Samsanov by inevitable right of conquest.,

That they were flouting it with their displays was insulting on top of that. In lieu of an actual aquarium (which would have been an acceptable display of culture), the Coalition Dropship flaunted their impossibly thin and high resolution 2D displays to fake both an outside view of Luthien (supplied by a dedicated camera, he was

informed) as well as the fake view into water on the other end.

And this Ambassador (an insult to the honourable title!) de Borbon had the audacity to apologize for the lack of a 3D holographic projector over the meeting table to properly display things! It was like they actually expected to be able to match the Star League, or even exceed it! The nerve!

He excused himself, noting that the talk of diplomats was not something he could really contribute to. As he was escorted out, he walked with the last of the repatriated citizens of the Dragon, and took some time to properly welcome them back to Luthien. His escort gave them plenty of time to properly disembark, where Jerry found himself back with the groundcars that were idle. There, he began to reflect on what he had seen and heard, planning out how to best exploit the weaknesses in culture and military that the Coalition were so proud of.

He would make sure to do a good job of them for his formal report to the Warlord.

Diplomatic Stateroom

CSN *Union-Class Dropship Olympus*

08 September 3022

"So, the next part of the meeting. How goes the construction of our Embassy?" de Borbon passed the table to the Architect, who nodded before reciting his report from memory.

"Construction proceeds apace. As said four days ago, we had to reinforce the foundation due to insufficient knowledge about local soil composition. This was within expected parameters, and the reinforcement was completed last last night. This pushes back our completion date by two days, but as no one outside this room knows what that date is, I don't feel it's a vital complication."

He paused, as though processing his next remarks. "While I'm sure our head of Intel will add his own thoughts to this, but I would also like to add that the attempt by the ISF last night to intrude their

agents into the construction site was countered, and no damage to the facility was incurred. I will let my colleague present the facts in more detail during his report. We expect no delays in construction as long as the local Intelligence Community maintains the same level of professional restraint." He coughed. "I believe Colonel Kurita is next?"

Chou rose as the Architect sat down. "Thank you. Mine will be quite short. I, and Ambassador de Borbon presented ourselves to the next level of Imperial Bureaucracy in the Unity Palace. Thankfully, having an invitation signed by the Coordinator personally is expediting the process, so as this rate, I should have my audience in early October. Chandrasekhar is being supportive, and helping to grease certain wheels we were not aware of. And yes, he is expecting a return on his investment. That is not a discussion for here and now, but will have to be done in the future." The Colonel sat down, sipping a bit of water, gesturing for the next person to speak.

ISF Annex, Intelligence Gathering and Analysis Division

Luthien, Draconis Combine

10 September 3022

"Nothing?" The man who was called Chou (a coincidence, or perhaps a joke by his superiors) sighed as he looked at the other two people in his observation cell. They were given the inglorious, but still vital task of observing the developing Coalition Embassy, something which was equally a job that novices could perform and at the same time, something to cause the greatest of agents to develop a lethal hernia.

On the one hand, there was no obvious counter-intelligence past a couple men who advertised their positions and responsibilities. They were the ones who checked the workers hired locally to help construct the Embassy, which these people had softly inserted themselves into with no difficulty. The All Seeing Eyes had floorplans in hand, handed out to aid in the construction effort, something which caused the observation cell to think that these Neo-Barbs were going to be an easy assignment.

Then all their observation equipment went dead.

At first, it was just the bugs they had planted in the construction site, hoping to catch secret words. This was to be expected, of course. It was normal.

What was insulting was the electronic voice on one of their recorders speaking his name, and giving them credit for a job well done, and then asking them to please wait until the Embassy was finished.

A lesser agent might have have rallied against the insult, but Chou was not a lesser man. He recognized the actions of the Great Game and the opening moves of the new players who knew and played the game well.

He knew that these men, these people from the Coalition of Sovereign Nations, that they were grandmasters in the realm of shadows. And from that, the O5P, not the ISF, would take them seriously.

**Coalition of Sovereign Nations Emabssy, Embassy Row
Unity City, Luthien, Draconis Combine
31 September 3022**

The Embassy was finished, for certain definitions of the word. It was complete, but there were those thousand little details that always needed fixing and dealing with. However, the new Coalition Embassy was in a state to host their first party. de Borbon had naturally invited Ambassador Salvadore-Kurita, as well as the only other Ambassador in residence along the street, the one from the Outworlds Alliance.

It was a sad state of affairs, on Embassy Row. The only two serious Embassies were from Periphery nations, the Coalition and the Alliance. The Taurians had an 'official representative', but the sheer distance involved meant that relations between the two nations was limited at best to an "Enemy of my Enemy" basis.

Given that there was, technically, a war between the Combine and the Dragon's neighbors in the Federated Suns and Lyran Commonwealth, the diplomatic posting from the Steiner's was

considered a dead-end, a punishment for those who were still too valuable to release from the service of their house. The traditional malice between the Kurita's and Davion's meant that there was no proper Embassy on Luthien or Avalon for the other.

The Free Worlds League and the Capellan Confederation both were in the process of reactivating their own embassies, small parties of trusted men in the process of refurbishing the buildings in question. For those not in the know, the situation was the same as with the Taurians. For those who were more aware of such things, then it was in preparation for the revelation of the Concord of Kapteyn to the rest of the Inner Sphere in two weeks time.

de Borbon had invited those people as well, a gesture of good will that would go far in Diplomatic circles. Added to the guest list was the ComStar Precentor – while he wasn't on the First Circuit, de Borbon did insinuate in his invitation that he was looking forward to a long and fruitful relationship with the local HPG station, as was due their station.

Oddly enough, everyone accepted the invitations, if only for the chance for free food and to feel out the initial diplomatic offerings of this newest minor power.

It was a huge security headache for the GDI troopers, Rainbow Six, and the Intelligence agents, but they pulled through. There was some help from the support staff of the invited, but as hosts, the final onus of hospitality was on them.

As the evening progressed, the Taurian representative approached de Borbon with a request from his superiors about the possibility of sharing technical details about the nuclear weapons used in the defense of Motherlode. He made it clear that the deal was reciprocal, as the two active nuclear powers should compare notes and make improvements based on the designs of the others. de Borbon pointed out that such a decision would have to be made above his head, but of course he would send the request with the next group of messages back to Antallos.

The representative of the Steiner family shared a sampling of the fruit

plates with the Liao Ambassador, discussing the empty nothings of people with nothing to say. But they did watch everything around them like hawks, hoping to notice or overhear some important detail that they could offer to their masters to get them out of this hellhole position.

And along one back wall, a Coalition diplomatic adjunct offered a Combine diplomatic adjunct a perfunctory non-alcoholic drink. "We do want to apologize for that thing last week," he said as the drink was accepted. "We had no idea they would try to tap into our internal music system." A gesture to the soothing classical music from before spaceflight that just wouldn't go away added emphasis.

"Such things happen. The ISF was quite annoyed when their wiretap went awry. What is it that they got anyways? I've heard it and it's quite... catching, in an insidious manner."

"Carmelladansen, SpeedyMix. According to our records, that's what we were using to test the system when they made their intrusion."

"Ah. I must say that such a tune would not see much success in the civilized nations of the Inner Sphere. And the higher-ups in the ISF are getting impatient – angry even – looking for success against your defenses."

"Oh? That almost sounds like a threat."

"Not from me, my friend."

"Ah. That's good to hear. Enjoying the drink? I can get a refill if you want."

"No thank you. Moderation in all things, you understand. I do have a question for you though."

"Yes? Can't promise an answer though."

"What is the name of your organization? The ISF nor the O5P have been able to divine that yet. Rumors of 'Nod' keep appearing, but your true name is like smoke."

"Well, I can tell you that NOD is not it. We rejected it on cultural grounds. And there was something dry about being called the 'Nonstandard Operations Division.'"

"Pity. Nod has such a fore behind it when you say it. Nod. NOD. Simple. Threatening even."

"Thanks, but sorry to disappoint. I'll tell you though, that the people who wanted that name even had a logo put together and everything. A crimson scorpion tail on a truncated black triangle background. A sort of thematic opposite to the Bronze Eagle."

"Ah, yes, I can see that. One is a bright and proud predator, glorious in movement and action. The other a hidden and dangerous creature, full of poison and death. A shame. We may have to steal that for ourselves."

"Be our guests. Actually, I do have a quick question for you. ISF or O5P?"

"I'm insulted that you'd have to ask! Now, back to the important business. Such unprofessional behavior is a bother, and we cannot protect you from more... overt expressions of their annoyance."

"Well, I suppose we could let them get some files we have about the other intelligence agencies. Let them know where we stand and all that."

"Oh, all of them?"

"Of course. Well, just our primers on them. O5P, ISF, DMI, Heimdall, Loki, ROM, MIIO, SAFE, Maskirova. Just to let them have a taste of where we stand."

"I'm sorry. ROM? Are they the replacement Outworlds agency?"

"ROM? No! They're ComStar. Helps keep the Houses out of their internal business."

"Ah, yes, Indeed. Such a minor player slipped my mind."

**Coalition of Sovereign Nations Emabssy, Embassy Row
Unity City, Luthien, Draconis Combine
17 October 3022**

The Combine businessman left the Sovereign Nations Embassy, escorted to his waiting groundcar by a mixed guard of his own loyal people and the Embassy guards. There were no negative feelings between him and the people and he left behind. There was some disappointment in his body language though.

In the groundcar, and a few minutes later, he picked the satellite phone out of it's guarded case, a precious piece of lostech his family hoarded with extreme care.

"The negotiations were a failure, Father." He said after dialing a number and waiting for the third ring. "While there is much the Combine can gain from the Coalition, the impression I got was that the CSN is truly self-sufficient across all their core worlds, and has no need of material imports on the national level."

"I was told that there were, however, two possible avenues for the betterment of our more personal and corporate relations. But such transactions would have to go through Antallos, rather than Luthien." He paused, letting the man on the other end process this information.

"..."

"Yes, father. They were quite respectful of our position and strength. I believe that Third Earth has organizations similar to ours, which is why they were receptive to personal interactions. It may be an avenue worth investigating."

"..."

"I agree completely. I must also add that they were actively encouraging what they described as 'investment opportunities' on Antallos. It seems to me that their internal policy is to make every

world under their purview to be self-sufficient, and the unplanned addition of Antallos to their nation was an unexpected drain on their economy. The involvement of... interested parties would be most appreciated."

"..."

"Yes, Father. I agree completely. I will go to the HPG station and compose a missive to our people on Antallos to begin the process of opening up this new market right away."

Imperial Gardens, Imperial Palace, Imperial City
Luthien, Draconis Combine
12 November 3022

It was a chip and crisp early evening as the mightiest man in the Draconis Combine, Takashi Kurita, and his personal guest, Chou Kurita, strolled down the garden paths, lights flickering on around them as the twilight darkness began to descend upon them.

"I must thank you once again for the dinner, Lord Coordinator." Chou offered sincere thanks as they walked in the silence of the garden. He noted that although it was October on Earth and Terran by the calendar, Luthien's orbit was bringing it into mid-spring, with all the weather that entailed. It was a dichotomy that the Earth-born officer did not think he would ever get used to.

"Think not of it, dear cousin. After those unseemly delays, it was the least I could do. Eating alone certainly has its place, but sometimes good company is a reward as well." Takashi paused to let part of his current rotation of security check the next section of garden. Over the many years of his reign, the many assassination attempts on his life had given him a proper paranoia as to his safety.

As the two of them waited in the center of a pool of light, he thought over the gift that the Tai-sa (no, Colonel, he reminded himself. Same rank, different name) Chou had gifted him at their introduction on behalf of his nation as a suitable tribute to the Dragon.

Right now, his head Gardener was checking the authenticity of the cutting of the Sakura Tree that was the gift. The results of those tests would shape much of the future relations between The Dragon and the Coalition, at least on the personal level.

A subtle gesture was made by Takashi's majordomo, and the two men began to stroll again, Chou a half-step behind the Coordinator, as was proper. "I trust you find my world to your liking?"

Chou knew that this question was the political equivalent of asking 'what do you think of the weather?', and that it wasn't a loaded question. Still, he was careful in choosing the words to his reply. "It is different from my homeworld, Lord Coordinator. I must confess that the differences are refreshing and I find them to be a wonder to experience."

Takashi nodded at the acceptable answer. There were some subjects of discussion that he wished to breach with this lost cousin of his, and he felt that holding such a discussion amidst the splendor of the Imperial Gardens would put Chou at ease. He had held such discussions here before, and would likely do so again. "Tell me, cousin of mine, what was it that you did before the counter-invasion of Antallos?"

Chou spoke the truth instantly. "I commanded a ship tasked with anti-piracy work away from my home, Lord Coordinator. After the attack by the *Drakon*, my crew and I were recalled to the defense of our homeworld. After we defeated the invasion force sent by the Pirate Vorax, I was assigned to the captured Jumpship fleet as the naval commander, second only to the leader of the expedition, General Davis."

The Dragon pondered this. The Coalition had a pirate problem even before the *Drakon*? Must have been more local issues than the possibility of pirates from within the Inner Sphere. "It must be hard for you then, to be so far away from your family. Have you received messages from them yet, from your wife and sons?"

Chou did not go with his first response, instead telling the Coordinator "I have no immediate family, Lord. My father died of old

age some years ago, and my mother followed him shortly thereafter. My duties here, I must confess, denied me those joys."

Takashi glowered. "A man of your rank and station should not be alone in his life." He considered adding more, but refrained. The personal shame of his son having no wife yet, let alone producing an legitimate successor (he had no doubts there were illegitimate grandchildren of his, although he could not recognize them) meant that to interfere with the life of another Kurita in such a manner, without his own house in order... He simply could not do it with any propriety.

Chou decided that since Takashi had introduced the subject, he could respond with a question of his own. "What of yours, my Lord? I know you have a son, Theodore Kurita, and I have heard tales of the beauty of your wife, but I did not see either of them today and I wished to pay my respects."

"My wife had other duties, cousin. She has her own place, but could not make it. I assure you, no slight was intended." Chou nodded his acceptance as Takashi sought the right words for the other half of the question. "My son..." He paused. "My son has his own duties in the service of the Dragon, and is away from Luthien."

"Ah, such misfortune. I had hoped to meet them, and give them their proper greetings." Chou wasn't lying there. One of the directives from the Coalition leadership was to make a good impression with Theodore, in the hopes that his reforms would help secure the safety of the Coalition in the future. "I take it you are unhappy with the distance between father and son?"

The Dragon knew he could respond to that question in either way that it could have been asked, and chose to keep the conversation polite. The Son of the Dragon was no ordinary child. "Indeed. Not having a loyal son at one's side is an absence felt sorely."

Chou nodded, waiting in the light as Takashi stopped again, waiting for the next area to be scoured and secured. As they rested, a rustle of cloth came from behind, and both Kurita's turned as one. There, the Head Gardener stood at the edge of the light, a flush look on his face

as though he had run from wherever he had been before. There was a quick glance at Chou, then he fixed his gaze onto a piece of ground a half-pace in front of his Lord. "My Lord Coordinator, Great Dragon, forgive the intrusion upon your private moments, but I have the results."

Chou relaxed a bit. He knew that the gift was real. The Heavenly Emperor had selected it himself from his gardens for just this purpose. Beside him, Takashi stepped forward to address his subordinate. "Please. Enlighten me."

Once again, the Gardener glanced at Chou, this time with a sense of wonder in it. "My Lord, Glorious Dragon..." He took a deep breath to steady himself. "A comparison of the gift and our own samples is conclusive in all forms." Chou wanted the man to get to the point, but recognized that the Combine had their own way of doing things, especially where The Dragon was concerned. "It is the same. No, more than that. The gift shows it being grown in soil taken from Terra. It is real. More than real. I have checked with ComStar. The gardens on Terra are dead, but Motherlode has preserved the Chrysanthemum Throne's garden in this. It is... Aiieee! I cannot say!"

"Say it!" Takashi snapped his command with a tone that nearly caused Chou to come to attention.

"My Lord Dragon! The gift from Motherlode, Third Earth... It is closer to the Imperial Gardens of Nippon than our own garden. I HAVE FAILED YOU!" Chou's mouth dropped open a little as the wailing gardener prostrated himself before the two Kuritas. "My life's work! My Lord Dragon! Please! I beg of you! Give me leave to travel to this world that has preserved the past perfectly! Let me..."

"Calm yourself!" Takashi said, his voice more gentle now.

"I did not expect that." Chou commented quietly. This was a bit excessive, even by the standards of the Combine, if the Coordinator's reaction was any indication.

"A moment, Cousin. I must deal with this matter." Chou bowed slightly and moved to the edge of the light, allowing the two men to

converse in relative privacy. As he did so, he became aware of the presence of the majordomo beside him.

"Lord Chou, I must offer my apologies. I had thought your world uncultured, but I have seen what assails my fellow so. We had thought your world another Neo-Barbarian culture, but this... You have honoured this House immensely by giving them a solid link to the ancestors on Terra so long lost." The majordomo spoke softly as to not disturb the interplay between Takashi and his Gardener.

Chou whispered in reply. "It was the only thing we could do. Those men who are loyal servants of the Dragon show it every day, with every breath. We could only show our friendship not through gems or Mechs or Technology. We had only one chance to show that we are more than what you thought us, and I am glad to see it so."

"Cousin! Return!" Takashi's voice carried to them, and Chou found himself alone as he returned to the presence of the Dragon. There was a deep change in the man, he noticed. Now there was a swelling pride, and a hint of a smile on the Coordinator's face. Chou saw all this, and knew that things would go well.

"I take it you are satisfied with our gift, Lord Coordinator?" Chou asked with the proper degree of formality.

"Cousin! May I call you Chou? You may address me as Takashi. And yes, your gift was of such undeniable beauty that I may have lost my trusted Gardener. He has declared his life's ambition to be to travel to your world, to partake of your gardens, to die happy."

Chou was taken aback. *This!* This he really didn't expect. "Of course, Lord Takashi." He added the Lord for now to keep his formality intact. "I cannot say when my superiors will allow for such a thing, but I know they are open to cultural exchanges as they give clear benefits to all involved."

"I can ask for no more at this time Chou. But now, on to more serious matters."

Chou didn't like that one bit. "Of course, Lord Takashi. What do you

wish to discuss?"

"It has come to my attention that the honourless Davions have offered to sell your fragile nation small fusion engines for those aircraft you so favor with your lack of a proper military force of Battlemechs."

Chou did not hide his surprise. "I was not informed of such a thing, Lord Takashi. But I cannot say that I find the idea impossible."

"Of course. You would please pass along a message to your Lord Ryan for me? Tell him that the Dragon holds their friendships dear to their heart, and it would break that heart for me to see my friends stray to untrustworthy strangers with darkness in their souls."

Chou had to admire the threat and its wording. Play with the Combine, or else. "Of course, Lord Takashi. We know who our friends are. And who they are not. To act against the former and for the latter is the realm of pirates and barbarians, whom we are not, I can assure you."

Takashi nodded. "Such is truth." He pondered how to bring up the next subject. He had already issued a threat, and to launch into another one so soon would be too much. He needed a more gentle piece of news to buffer the two. Ah! He could do that instead! "Chou, you may not be aware, but the Draconis Combine has finalized negotiations with the Capellan Confederation and the Free Worlds League for more open borders and exchanges of technology with those nations that we have no quarrel with, all done with our magnanimity for our lesser equals in the Inner Sphere."

Chou raised an eyebrow in surprise. Takashi was talking about the Kapteyn Accords? With him? "Oh? I know we are not the equals of the Great Houses..." His voice trailed off.

Takashi nodded in agreement. "Indeed, but our cooperation with the factory on Antallos – from which we have received the first pair of Mechs in excellent order – showed those nations that the Combine is honorable and trustworthy. For that, you have our thanks as it made the negotiations smoother and better for all parties." He knew it was an exaggeration, but it would serve his purposes here. And in all

honestly, the fact that the Combine was capable of reaching out to be magnanimous rather than patronizing was a huge leap forward in how those nations viewed The Dragon. It was not an unpleasant sensation, to have trusted allies. He knew that there were factions inside the Combine that could not accept this price to have a stronger Combine, but he would deal with them in good time.

That was another honest surprise for the Coalition Officer. And one that he would have to report back on. During his briefings, it was noted that the Accords was a very strained organization, a treaty forced by ComStar onto the signatory nations to create a powerbloc to oppose the Davion-Steiner merger. If it had a better start, who knows what changes would result? "We are glad to be of such a small service, Lord Takashi."

"Of course, such things are not without their price, you understand."

And here was the other shoe, Chou sighed inside.

"The Dragon is quite disturbed, Cousin Kurita, that the Coalition defended their world with vile weapons, banned by all civilized nations. We understand the need, but understand that the use of such weapons in the future, for any but the most extreme of scenarios, will be met with the full displeasure of The Dragon."

Undisclosed Time, Undisclosed Location Luthien, Draconis Combine

Two members of the Black Dragons sat in the well lit and well ventilated room, enjoying the fruits of their labours and the rewards of their positions. Neither was into excess as other certain members of their society were, but they did not let that get in the way of doing what was right for the Combine.

Between them was the transcript of the total conversation held between the Dragon, Lord Kurita and the false-Kurita, Chou. It was accurate in all details as they would have punished quite severely anyone who tampered with the evidence they now pondered.

"This is a perplexing line of events." The elder of the two spoke. "On one hand, we must find fault with the false humility that the Coordinator displays to this backward cousin of his. Yet, on the other hand, we must applaud the actions he has taken as they have served to build further the armed forces of the Combine. The Antallos Factory is, by the latest report, producing a new Jenner chassis every 64 days, down 6 from the previous owners. All of which have gone to the Galedon District, where the local forces have equipped them with proper engines and weapons."

"I must concur." The younger added, giving the senior the proper deference. "It would seem like the gamble of Subhadar and the Coordinator has given rise to a boon, not a bane. And yet, it is still not right, for we are dependent on a foreign power – even if it is for a small fraction of our proper might."

"Oh, I must agree. Yet because of the boon, we cannot act against it directly. However, Once again, the thoughts of the Coordinator and of us are in some alignment. I have it that Lord Kurita has sent a Writ of Command to Warlord Samsanov. In it, he tells the Warlord that if there is an immediate military threat to the Antallos Factory, he is to secure it with all haste."

"Surely the wording of the letter was not that vague?" The younger rolled in her mind the consequences of such an open-ended command.

"Of course. There are still some limits and details. Such that the Warlord cannot move to a 'perceived' threat, but to a legitimate provable one." The elder sipped some more tea. "But with this in hand, the good Warlord can move to protect the Combine in a hour of need."

"That is good news. But the Warlord is not one of us. A shame."

"No, but there is another whom we are already scouting out to join our ranks who can prove to be an asset to our cause."

"Oh?" The younger hid her surprise behind a veil of indifference. "And whom would that be?"

"One Jerry Akuma. Given these recent events, it has been decided to make his track to joining our organization a faster one. He has the ear of Warlord Samsanov, and thus, would be a useful tool to our plans." The elder paused to let the younger digest this information.

Eventually, she spoke. "And what is to be my place in this plan, honored Elder? I do not see how I may be of assistance to the Society."

The elder smiled a gentle smile. "You will be tasked with aiding Jerry Akuma in what he needs. A Warrior of your skill, a Woman of your beauty, will be able to sway him, even when the needs of the Combine cannot."

The younger woman considered this, and accepted her duty.

Imperial Gardens, Imperial Palace, Imperial City
Luthien, Draconis Combine
13 November 3022

Florimel Kurita, Keeper of the House Honor, sat at tea with her chosen successor, and aide – Constance Kurita. The two women had examined the demanded genealogical records of one Chou Kurita, to determine how his family, and that of the Coordinator related.

It was good news. The Motherlode branch of the Kurita Family that Chou represented was indeed related to the primary family, but as was expected, the last connection was from before the fall of the Star League. That meant that there was no threat from that branch of the family in terms of political power. Not to mention their loyalty to the neo-Barb nation.

It was a conundrum to the two women, but they were both thankful that Lord Takashi had chosen the path of peace in dealing with this lost branch of his family, rather than trying to prune it for some vague and undefined reason. Perhaps, the two of them thought, Theodore's own glory seeking ways could be tempered into something better for the Combine of the future.

Coalition of Sovereign Nations Embassy, Embassy Row, Imperial City
Luthien, Draconis Combine
14 November, 3022

"It's official then." de Borbon read over the document in front of him, comparing with the one from the Source Material. They were functionally similar, the difference being that one was written by professional lawyers and politicians, and the other by a game company trying to rebalance a game at the strategic level.

Across from him, Chou nodded. "ComStar should deliver this news to Antallos in a couple of days due to their public transmission speed. Then another couple of weeks for an official response from Earth."

de Borbon put down the two documents, no longer needing them. "Have you heard anything on your end? I've already had to assure my counterpart that the CSN will have to re-evaluate our position in relation to the Federated Commonwealth, as such a merger changes the power dynamic of the entire Sphere. I implied that the Combine was seen as the safer choice, without actually saying anything."

"I'll leave that in your hands then. Chandrasekhar has already offered me a ride back to Antallos as he wants to return there as soon as possible to try and get the Factory there to produce faster. Apparently a 30 ton Mech every eight weeks isn't good enough for him. I'm not sure I should accept at this time."

"I don't see why not. You'd have to take a body guard back with you of course. There's a couple men who aren't fitting in according to the reports that cross my desk. Rotating them back to Antallos or Earth would be a good thing."

"I'm just not sure I should leave so soon after my talk with the Coordinator."

"Oh, well, I can send out feelers to see if he wants you to remain, or if he wouldn't mind if you return to your duties back home."

"Thank you."

"No problem."

Praxton Fusion Products Head Office
Praxton, Outworlds Alliance
The Periphery
August 6, 2007/3022

These Motherloaders might be wealthy, but they didn't dress like nobility. That wasn't looking good for Tori Wilbury's hopes they would live up to their reputation as gullible little freshfaces with too much money. Her visitor wore a crisp black suit, which while cut to fit was too plain and were more like what servants would wear. No gems or precious metals anywhere. He was wearing sensible shoes, while the wealthy in the Inner Sphere chose boots whenever possible. Not only did such require more leather than mere shoes, wearing well-made boots tended to give one an unconscious swagger.

Tori Wilbury resisted the urge to glance down at herself. She was wearing a sleek brown suit with emerald inlays upon the buttons, white gloves, her glasses were horn-rimmed, a short cape as an accessory to emphasize her command and military background, and of course tall black leather boots. The billowy pant legs for her riding pants were tucked in. Hers was an outfit designed to intimidate those who didn't realize what power there was in being the owner of company that produces Fusion Engines; those beating hearts of the famed war machines, the BattleMechs, which ruled over destinies in the Inner Sphere. Praxton Fusion Products was critical to the Outworlds Alliance- without it; the whole OWA would be crippled in both its economy and the ability to defend itself.

George Winston smiled warmly and shook her hand as she bid welcome to her office. The old man didn't pull any attempts to charm, like kissing her hand, which was a refreshing change. He had no noble airs. This was a man who lived for the making of money. That was reassuring, in its own way.

After the customary pleasantries were over (tea and biscuits were the fare for negotiation, to the old man's surprise) Winston brought up his briefcase. "Before we begin, let me establish our bonafides." he said gently. "I represent the Antallos and Near Periphery Trading and Acquisitions Company, or ANP-TASC, and I've been authorized by my

government to make whatever purchases and investments necessary to secure a steady supply of Fusion Engines of the class one hundred, hundred twenty-five, hundred sixty, and two hundred."

He took out a bank draft. "To help trade between our governments, our funds are guaranteed by Comstar. This isn't a draft for C-bills, but securities based on gold bullion redeemable into C-bills." That draft was for one hundred thousand C-bills. Winston only really carried one, since that reduced the risk of theft and large-scale transactions didn't involve any direct exchange but banks talking to each other. The OWA's populace may not trust banks, but the companies that needed to deal with massive amounts of cash could not do without.

Tori smiled slightly. That was more like it. "I see. So how many Engines do you want to buy?"

"All that you have in stock, plus whatever you can produce in the next year."

The CEO of Praxton Fusion Products couldn't help but to laugh. That would be millions of C-bills, ten at least, and ridiculous. That was enough to buy a company of 'Mech or Air Lances to defend a world. These people must be desperate. She pitied how these innocent newcomers had no idea of just how much scarcity locked the prices of important components. Even the entire Alliance Aerospace Arm could only increase their forces by at most five new ASF per year, and most of that being rebuilt from other sources.

She paused and stared at his placid expression. "You're serious?"

"If you have it, we'll pay for it. What's the problem?"

"No, we exactly don't keep any 'stock' of Fusion Engines." Tori explained as the pleasantries passed and negotiations went into full swing. She put one leg over the other and leaned back casually. "It takes a lot of time and effort to make Engines." She absently rubbed the bottom of her lip with the side of her index finger in a thoughtful gesture that was all-too-deliberate. "I mean, yes, we do have some Engines on reserve, but they're held in case of increased demand from our primary customers."

"Alliance Defenders?"

"Among others. We produce a lot of the essential components on-site; we only need some of the rarer metals from mining interests around the Periphery. We only have two production lines, and it takes time to switch things over from producing a Nissan One-Twenty to a One-Sixty and a One-Eighty to a Two-Hundred. All contracts are set ahead of other factories' own production schedules."

Winston nodded. "So the scarcity of resources isn't your bottleneck." He let out a relieved sigh. "We'll be talking to Alliance Mining anyway." He chuckled and looked out the window of the office. "Don't worry about finishing the production runs for your present contracts, they're going to be picking up demand, yes." he said while nodding absently. "We're buying their products too."

Tori frowned. Fusion Engines were one thing, but BattleMechs and AeroSpace Fighters more than doubled or tripled the price. Maybe these Motherloaders were hoping to undercut the sale price, but in this case there was no middleman. The defence industries of the Alliance, all of them save Mountain Wolf BattleMechs, bought their Engines directly from her company. There were no procurement mark-ups to shave down. Amused, she asked "What, all of them?"

Winston nodded, an indulgent grandfatherly smile on his face.

Tori's cheek twitched. Impossible. How rich were these bastards?

"That's enough. You've had your fun." Tori added flatly. "We can accommodate a short production run of one Engine Class starting three months from now. Contracts are to be paid half in advance. We can work out how much we can both afford to produce without having to reactivate a production line."

"Why can't you just reactivate a production line?" The way she said it, the act sounded prohibitively expensive. That interested George Winston more than just the merchandise. "Miss Wilbury, I am truly authorized by ANP-TASC, and the interests of the Coalition of Sovereign Nations. We're more than willing to invest further in

making sure you can produce the Engines we require."

That was incredibly suspicious. Tori licked her lips and tried not to show any hint of her building terror. Anyone who would sink so far as to improve an outside business interest would surely also prefer to own said business outright. "It's not a matter of funding..." she replied hesitantly. "It's a matter of manpower. The old factories are very complex, very finicky. Our engineers are already doing the best they can to maintain the existing lines. Activating more increases the likelihood something would break beyond repair."

"Ah." That was more a matter for Henry Calmer, the mission's DOORWAY asset. The man was a Star League engineer. Too bad he was over on Alpheratz, negotiating with Mountain Wolf BattleMechs. "Look, I'm not kidding when I say all the contracts you're going to get the rest of the year will either be through me or in some way motivated by other purchases we're making in the OWA. We need - all- the Fusion Engines we can get, no matter what size or rating."

"If you don't mind me asking, what the hell are you going to use that many Engines for?"

"We have lots of Fission Reactors we'd like to replace, Miss Wilbury." Winston said with an amused chuckle. It was the exact literal truth, after all. "Forgive an old man's enthusiasm. Any and all Fusion Engines you can provide, we can probably find a use for them somehow. Don't worry, I'm sure we'll both benefit from repeat business."

"I... see." That made sense. Replacing hideously obsolete and dangerous Fission Engines with Fusion ones was a worthwhile investment. But was it the truth? These Motherloaders were no Periphery barbarians, but their rumored lostech clashed with how primitive they admitted their other systems were. Of course, just because a war machine might be powered by Fission rather than Fusion did not make it any less a tool of murder.

Looking at the old man, she realized she didn't care. She'd be a fool to turn away a business opportunity like this. Her factory only ran for half a year, holding Engines back for when her customers could

actually raise their own contracts to pay her for them. She just made Engines, she knew she shouldn't give a damn what others used them for, what wars the Houses fought, unless it would harm the Outworlds Alliance. "Tell me straight, then. The Engine Ratings do you want most, and I'll tell you how many of them we can make, from scratch, in a year."

Tori Wilbury's office was large and impressively furnished with dark wood furniture and large picture windows inlaid with white marble. On the walls hung paintings of the BattleMechs and combat vehicles that could use the Fusion Engines that her company provided. Though the Engines themselves were known as Nissan Fusion Engines, it had been centuries since that trademark meant anything. The license came with the factory, and her family had clung with bloody determination to hold it intact through the fall of the Star League. Praxton Fusion Products Limited formed the bedrock of the Outworld Alliance's ability to defend itself.

The Nissan 120 for the *Wasp* and *Stinger* Light BattleMechs, the two 'Mechs were depicted standing back to back on the large painting furthest to her left. The Nissan 160 was for the *Locust*, and that spindly-legged machine was shown in mid-jump over a hill, one leg out in a dynamic sprinting pose. The painting next to it showed it a *Hunter* tank with the Nissan 175 firing into the distance with a white smoky tail of LRMs. The last painting showed the brick-like *Seydlitz* and the needle-like *Lightning* ASFs, using the Nissan 180 and 200 Engines respectively.

The paintings were arranged in alternating heights. George Winston noted that there was still space enough to hang several more frames. "We'll take the one-sixty and the two-hundred, as many as you can make."

Tori sniffed. The biggest, most expensive pair she could produce: Most profitable too, but those were definitely BattleMech ratings. Any chassis that could accommodate a 160 could get a flat 25% boost in performance by replacing it with a 200 Engine. "I can get you twelve one-sixties or eight two-hundreds. Or six of each."

George Winston winced. "In a year?" The Class 160 would go to the

laser tanks and Light AeroSpace fighters while the Class 200 would go into the GM-I and SF-I 'Swan' ASFs. He'd been expecting to secure *-at least-* twenty-four new combat platforms per year. "That's all?"

"By January, yes." Tori laced her fingers together and leaned on her elbows. "The price is five million C-bills, half in advance. This is not negotiable. We're going to have to reset our production lines for them." Her factory could only handle the production of one Engine rating at a time.

George Winston stared outside thoughtfully. Tori's office overlooked a sculpted garden. Beyond were rolling green hills. Praxton was a world that was at risk only because of the Fusion Engine factory on its surface. By that same token, only the value of the plant ensured that unlike most other worlds it had adequate forces for self-protection against raiders. It might not be wise to depend so much on outside production, but then Coalition and GDI its fighting arm had no choice. Even the best estimate for when Earth could begin Fusion Engine production was in the order of at least five years away.

After a long while he turned and asked "If I gave you five million - now-, in gold or C-bills, could you do better than that? We're still interested in the lighter Engines, if you can add some to the primary production run."

Tori's bowels clenched. Very slowly, very primly, she put down the cup that was halfway to her lips. The bone china tinkled as the cup was laid onto its dish by her faintly shaking fingers.

"I said, enough joking around." she hissed.

Winston smiled, like a shark smelling blood in the water. "If you insist. No more kidding around, Miss Wilbury. Ten million."

"That's all?" Tori scoffed lightly. Her eyes glittered with suspicion. "Tell me what you really want from us."

Her visitor could be lying about his company's ability to buy that many Engines, it might be an overly ambitious scam. If not... only the Great Houses could afford to be so flippant, and they wouldn't have

anything but conniving designs behind being so 'generous'. A Periphery power had no business trying to put on airs like that. If it was true... then it was too good to be true! There had to be a catch. She would NOT hand over control of her family's factory!

Nobody puts down ten millions C-bills without blinking. Even Alliance Defenders Limited, the Outworlds Alliance's largest military defence industry, could only afford to split orders into quarterly instalments. Why go to her, instead of a larger House-owned Engine manufacturer? How close the OWA was to Antallos was both a benefit and a clear danger.

Winston shrugged. "Honestly? For the Successor Lords to choke in their own vomit when they realize someone's not interested in playing their games their way."

Mad, Tori decided. These Motherloders had an inflated sense of their own power. Were they grubbing for more? Wealth was not enough, she knew this from experience. What was gold but soft metal against the might of a greedy House Lord's army? Whether it was ego or ambition, she had a feeling that her part of the Periphery would not be ignored by the warmongers through their unimportance or isolation for much longer.

She licked her lips and forced a smile on her face. "I see. It's a pleasure doing business with you, Mister Winston." Five million five hundred C-bills was still a windfall she'd be a fool to ignore. Let them pay in advance. She'd sink it immediately into improving the security of her factory.

Mountain Wolf BattleMechs
Alpheratz, Outworlds Alliance
The Periphery
August 18, 2007/3022

Henry Calmer was not much impressed by Alpheratz' capital city. Famindas looked all but unchanged from when he'd last seen it almost four centuries ago. For that matter, he hadn't been impressed

by Earth's cities either. To him they were crowded, artless metropolitan grids, despite that the cities with the same names that he knew were from a world with nearly double the population. Already, overburdened Earth looked to be some years away from the Resource Wars he remembered from Terra's own history.

Given a choice between the toaster-worshipping cult of Comstar or the CSN's naively infantile ambitions, the Star League engineer felt he was better off seeking the shadow of the Star League from the planet in the Periphery. He'd grown up in an atmosphere of optimism, and the bleak reality of the Succession Wars made him feel so unclean.

As the group was shown around the Mountain Wolf BattleMech factory, Calmer couldn't help but to be impressed. Not because the factory was stirring example of industry - he'd seen many larger factories churning out BattleMech for the Star League - but because it was functioning at all. Compared to the production line used by Alliance Defenders Limited, the Mountain Wolf factory produced 'Mech chassis from start to finish uninterrupted by the need to manufacture certain components by hand.

Brandon O'Leary was the owner of Mountain Wolf, and was not a man who shirked from taking risks. He's spent most of his family's fortune rebuilding the Outworlds Mountain Wolf Mech factory. He'd presented the *Merlin* battlemech, hailed as the first totally new design in a hundred years and quite the serviceable war machine.

Since beginning production at 3010, however, he couldn't quite say that his gamble had paid off big. The factory itself was offline. The demand for a brand-new Heavy Mech was never all that high, especially considering the transport overhead hauling from the Periphery. But for such a poor state as the Outworlds Alliance, they never realized just how were blessed they were by this perfectly-intact Mech Factory.

Calmer was impressed, but mostly because of Brandon O'Leary's work in preserving the factory despite the OWA's consistent refusal to utilize such a resource. Mountain Wolf originally used the OWA branch to produce the Night Hawk battlemech, a Light 'Mech, and O'Leary had successfully retooled it to produce a Heavy.

Konrad Rohr, the heavysset representative of Advanced Research and Capital Investments, Europe, Reserved (ARCAER) sidled up next to him and asked "So, can we use this?"

"The factory doesn't seem to be broken anywhere." Henry Calmer replied. "I can't be sure while it's shut down like this, but just by retooling it to produce a Heavy, and a new design at that, O'Leary's proven he knows what he's doing."

"So it can be retooled again to produce our own designs?"

"Difficult, costly, but yes." Calmer looked ahead again to see O'Leary and Masahiko Seta laughing forcefully at some anecdote. The old man from HINODE was being far too cheerful, matching with O'Leary's gregarious enthusiasm. "What a waste. This man was born in the wrong century." That sort of single-minded technical devotion was a hallmark of the Star League.

"Or perhaps the exact right time where he's most needed." Rohr murmured speculatively.

Mountain Wolf BattleMechs was situated in a defensible valley with a river running through it, wide enough for barges to bring supplies and finished Mech's down to the port. The tour ended back at Brandon O'Leary's office, which had a clear view of the blue river out a marble balcony. The distinctive feature of his office was not an ostentatious CEO's desk, but a large conference table suitable for unrolling blueprints. On one wall, where one might normally hang a painting, was a framed blueprint of the *Merlin*.

"So, that's it. What do you think?" O'Leary asked. He sat, not behind his working desk, but at the head of the large conference table. Beside him to the left was Timothy Lee, his Chief Engineer.

"We are most impressed." said Seta. "We're confident that you can handle our orders." The old man's face showed mournful sadness. "Unfortunately we do not have much need for the *Merlin* at this time."

The smile was fixed on O'Leary's face. "That's fine. It's still nice to be

appreciated."

"We will still be purchasing the *Merlins* you have in stock." Seta added with a bow. "In gold or C-bills."

O'Leary blinked owlishly. Usually it would be a little more than a little show-and-tell before people could get down to business. He had to cajole and entertain buyers a little more to secure a contract, it was expected. Power belonged to the buyer, as Mountain Wolf was a minor operator compared even to major House salvage yards refurbishing fallen 'Mechs back to combat form. Why go to the Periphery for a Heavy when you can buy two Mediums or a lance of Lights, fast and cheap if second-hand, from a major vendor?

"I have two *Merlins* ready for delivery." he said, trying to keep a relieved wheeze from his voice.

A *Merlin* had a market price of nearly five million C-bills. He couldn't bring the order price below four million seven hundred due to lacking control over parts. Still, even with the bare minimum profit from nine million C-bills, that would allow him to reserve production for three more. Better a selective buyer now than waiting for a more demanding buyer later... whose orders he wouldn't be able to fulfil anyway without asking for a humiliating advance.

"That's fine." said Seta. The old man turned to his companions. "Is it?"

Rohr nodded. Both would go to Europe, as HINODE was interested in only humanoid-frame 'Mechs in the Medium weight class while the US already had their avian frame *Wild Cat*. No one commented on the four *Merlins* and two vintage *Night Hawks* they saw standing guard by the factory. O'Leary was properly paranoid over protecting his property.

"I apologize if we do not require you to provide any more." Seta then bowed and gestured over to Henry Calmer. "My colleague has something to say. Please let us discuss the details of our exchange later."

"Huh. Right." He put aside thoughts of asking for ten percent down,

so he could put down an advance bid on Praxton's next run of Engines before the ADL could pre-empt his needs again. He had no way of knowing that any further supply requirements had already been arranged, at seemingly inconvenient cost, well in advance.

He considered this other man. He certainly had the bearing of an engineer, even up to carrying a blue plastic roll tube on his back. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

Calmer nodded and took out the schematics he'd been entrusted with. "There's something else that we require. It's amazing how you retooled this factory completely. What would it cost for you to do it again?"

"I'm not sure what you mean?" O'Leary asked with a narrowed gaze.

"We'd like you to build for us our BattleMechs. We already have the designs ready for production. What we need is a factory that can produce them reliably."

"That's a very complicated thing you're asking." Timothy Lee put in. "This facility's designed for the *Night Hawk*. That's why the *Merlin* still looks like a big version of it. It's not going to be easy. It's not going to be cheap."

"You want us to make your 'Mechs...?" O'Leary's look and voice seemed far away. That was an option for Mountain Wolf's survival that he'd never considered. He'd gone deep into debt just covering research and development for the *Merlin*. If someone already did most of that... it would still be challenge, but with much of the hassle taken out of it! He sprang back into awareness. "Lee... can we do it?"

"I don't know. I can't say anything until we understand what it would take to build this hypothetical 'Mech." The wiry engineer looked warily towards the trade group. Mech design was a secretive and sometimes even a literal cut-throat business. "If you don't mind showing us?"

"Oh, no problem at all." Henry Calmer unrolled the schematics onto the table and pushed it forward. The blueprints were not enough to

build the 'Mech, but were detailed enough in the frame specifications that one could make a convincing knock-off. That is, if one were stupid enough to try and piece together a *Shadow Hawk* body and *Hunchback* legs rather than rebuilding and selling both for double the profit.

O'Leary and his Chief Engineer began to look over the designs, eventually communicating in half-formed conversations born of long collaboration over a drafting table.

"...a Large Laser and three Mediums? That's all?"

"...two Small Lasers. Maybe a flamer here."

"...Shadow Hawk arm?"

"...could hold an AC/5 okay."

"... too slow for the warload. Needs more long-range firepower."

"The Hawk's deadly because it can do that while light and fast. Not good enough."

"...too many heatsinks. Why not a PPC?"

"Get them from the same place we get own PPCs?"

"Wait, what's this estimate?"

"That... is stupidly cheap. Stupidly optimistic."

"... would have to be a total moron to mess up with this..."

As they examined the design, O'Leary's expressions shifted from curiosity, to contempt, to surprise, to curiosity again, to excitement, then finally forlorn depression. "I can't build this." he finally said, his shoulders sagging. "You could ask Alliance Defenders... they can probably build it a little cheaper than your estimate."

Calmer frowned. "We are not interested in offering this to Alliance

Defenders Limited. Cost is not an issue- reliable and speedy production is." ADE was a government-owned company and produced cheap Light mechs. He, and by extension ANP-TASC, didn't trust them to not put their own internal production orders ahead of what GDI needed or even to seize 'Mech runs outright. The people of the OWA still considered 'Mechs as 'Inner Sphere tools of hate' after all. "Do you really mean you can't build it... or you won't build it?"

"I'm not going to be allowed to." O'Leary replied with a wan grin. "The Merlin... it's a Heavy. It can't conflict with ADE's market share. Do you know, I have to get all components for it from outside the OWA? Lushann won't even sell me Medium Lasers. ADE has first pick of all military manufacturing inside the Alliance. It might as well be Alliance Defenders UNLIMITED - can't expand the Alliance military without giving it a kickback somewhere."

He began to chuckle. "Three million C-bills for this? You do realize this looks like it's been deliberately designed to undercut my *Merlin* for someone looking for a tough defensive 'Mech?"

"We were aware something like it was happening, but we had no idea it was that severe." said Masahiko Seta. He looked towards Rohr. "There is another option for us, isn't there?"

"Yes. Mister O'Leary- how would you like to become co-owner of a *GM-I* 'Mech factory on Antallos?" HINODE had already opened itself out to outside investors, the pressure of Mech manufacture could no longer be sustained internally. Rheinmetall was looking into foamed metal Structural Material and Endo Steel production too. "We can provide the site, the capital, the manpower, you provide the expertise."

"You're going to MAKE a Factory?" Lee crowed. "That's... even more stupidly expensive and complicated."

"Unlike this Factory, it will have to be chopped up into different assembly lines for the parts, so it would very much be helpful to have this one online and producing *GM* frames as proof. Its own independent run would be faster and more reliable."

The recovered Memory Core data that GDI had didn't actually go into the specifics of what actually went on inside a factory. The process, yes. But what exactly were these parts to make the parts and how were they machined and put together? Even Henry Calmer had no idea, in the same manner a metallurgist could not be expected to put together a steel plant, piping and all, just from his own knowledge.

"We have a piece by piece examination of a Jenner plant, but to make a Medium 'Mech factory, we need a working example."

"Wait... what..." O'Leary tugged confusedly at his moustache. "How can you fellahs know how to make 'Medium Mechs... but not know how to MAKE Medium 'Mechs?"

"We can make them well enough." Seta replied. "We can provide a *GM* for your examination later. There are still certain problems in the design we'd like your help in correcting..." Such as getting the *GM* to run past 65 kph without faceplanting onto the tarmac, for one "But unlike you, O-Leri-san, we can't forge and assemble them with just one uninterrupted line."

"Speed, huh?" O'Leary was getting a sinking feeling. "You sound like you're preparing for war."

"For self-defense only." Calmer added quickly. "The Periphery is not a safe place. You should know how often pirates attack. But...it's not just pirates that are attracted to wealth and resources,"

O'Leary thought it over. Strange. Why weren't they extending offers to invest into his company, controlling it from within, but rather on the outside to further diversify his assets? Unless they thought they could seize both quickly? The less cynical part of him asked if, maybe, they trusted his ability to deliver what they needed - more than what they'd gain just from trying to take over. He'd rather burn his own factory to the ground rather than have it be stolen from his family again.

"That's an interesting offer. I'll have to think this over." He stood turned around to look at the painting of his great-grandfather, the last Lyran owner of Mountain Wolf, flanked by a black *Night Hawk*

silhouetted against a red sunset. It took three hundred years, but he'd done his family justice.

"That's not all we're offering to help you with," Calmer said softly. He tapped the table with his fist. "Vendrell."

Brandon O'Leary turned around sharply, anger blazing in his gray eyes. "Get out."

"We are not and don't intend to be the Alliance's enemies. But work with us and we will do everything in our power to give you back the Mountain Wolf plant at Vendrell."

O'Leary laughed, loud and mocking. "Saying something like that, it just makes me trust you even less. I'm a businessman, and I'll get what I want by my own terms, my own strength. Take your poisoned charity elsewhere."

"You misunderstand, please listen, O-Leri-san." Seta said soothingly, his face placid like a Buddha statue. "We require many, many *GMs*. You will be wealthy. You will reach for your dreams legitimately. It will be hard, unceasing work and may even be dangerous. There will be those who will envy and hate your success.

A storm is coming, O-Leri-san, and if you must know why we are in such a hurry? We fear The Dragon that brings the rain."

O'Leary stood there in silence, his hand over his face and his thoughts whirling. He'd been but eighteen when he brought life back into Mountain Wolf, and how a decade and half later he was a few steps closer to reaching his dream. He'd given his life over to this bitter ambition to avenge his family's honor, and his days to smiling in the face of all the spite and all the disdain that his Alliance, for all his loyalty, spat in his face.

He looked up and smirked. "There's just one thing I don't understand..."

"Yes?" asked Calmer.

"Why haven't General Motors sued the pants off you bastards yet?" O'Leary asked with a grin. "You just know if I do make this thing, and it gets even a little popular, they'll be all over it for a lark."

Calmer winced. "It is... a mystery."

Seta actually looked mulish. "The *Robotic Mobile Guardian Machine, RM-GM*, is not assailable by copyright." His lawyers were actually looking forward to seeing GM try. Since there were similar companies that shared trademarks on Earth and the Inner Sphere, that inevitable lawsuit was one they were counting on to help define how the CSN might penetrate into the Inner Sphere markets.

Famindas City
Alpheratz, Outworlds Alliance
The Periphery
August 24, 2007/3022

Neil Avellar was tall, wiry, and wore his long dark hair long in a loose ponytail. He took a deep calming breath before entering the conference room in his own home, and stepped in. The room was somewhat dim, sunlight leaking through drawn cream curtains showed that those waiting took no pleasure from his arrival. The stood up in respect however, and he waved for them to sit. "Gentlemen and ladies, thank you for coming. I apologize for having you travel this far, and I'm grateful you obliged."

"Cut the chit-chat, cousin." said Hadisen Avellar, overall chairman of the board of United Outworlders Corporation, the OWA's ASF producer. He grinned, and puffed at his pipe. "We all know what this is about."

"That's still no excuse for rudeness, cousin." barked Maurice Avellar, commander of the Avellar Guards. He remained standing in parade rest, behind and slightly off the side, while the President sat at the head of the table.

"It's all right. No point in wasting time." said Neil Avellar. He looked at each of his visitors. Five of them, each representing the major military industries present within Alliance space. From left to right: Praxton Fusion Products, Lushann Industrials, United Outworlders, and Mountain Wolf. The only one missing was Alliance Industries Diversified, but Adam Smith Pallas was still expected to arrive from Sevon. Alliance Defenders was under direct government control, and thus technically under his direction.

He nodded towards the woman among them, blonde-haired Tori Wilbury. "Miss Wilbury, from what I've heard, our new friends from... This ANP-TASC from 'Motherlode'... has spoken to you about purchasing Fusion Engines? How many did they want?"

"All of them." Tori responded crisply.

"Mister Chatham? Lushann's Lasers have never been under any contract restrictions."

"They decided to double our production." the portly man replied. "Yes, yes, they wanted all of our lasers."

The President then pointed to Hadisen Avellar. "And United Outworlders?"

The smirking CEO tilted his head to the side and blew out smoke out the side of his mouth. "Whatever Seydlitz and Lightnings that hasn't been paid for in advance by the Aerospace Arm."

The President then pointed to Brandon O'Leary. "And Mister O'Leary?"

"Need you even ask?" O'Leary replied with a wide grin. "All of them!"

"So. Do you see the problem here?" Neil Avellar asked freely.

"They're buying up our ability to expand our defense forces?" Maurice Avellar replied with a scowl.

Hadisen shook his head and pointed with his pipe. "No, something

more basic. If your negotiations were anything like mine, these Motherloaders offered to pay in C-bills or gold, yes? The question therefore arises: adding together all of the purchase orders they've been making in Alliance space, can they really afford any of it?"

Maxwell Chatham of Lushann Industrials nodded. "It's so much so soon, are we sure this isn't a scam of some sort?"

President Avellar laced his fingers together and said flatly "ANP-TASC deposited ten tons of gold into Alpheratz Planetary Bank. They also deposited five tons with ComStar for liquidity."

Tori choked. Brandon whistled. "Daaamn..." he whispered. "That's... a pretty strong hand."

Chatham did some quick mental calculations. The Alliance escudo was backed by gold and silver, but the gold itself was matched against the C-bill, which was fixed currency throughout the Inner Sphere. "About three hundred C-bills an ounce...?" he murmured. Thirty two thousand ounces of gold per ton. Ten tons was almost a hundred million C-bills! His face eyes twisted into a grimace, eyes bulging out. The escudo was worth at best twenty percent of a c-bill.

Almost four hundred million escudo in the bank! At a time when even the most skilled worker could be considered very well-paid at four hundred escudo a month. "I could take out a business loan." he said idly, blinking with the realization. "A lot of people can make business loans."

In one gesture, the Motherloaders turned the OWA economy from a quicksand into something arguably solid.

Tori hugged herself and whispered. "This is insane."

"And I'm given to assume that they still have a few more tons of gold held in reserve in that dropship of theirs." Neil Avellar finished in the same dead tone of voice. His fingernails were digging into the back of his palms. If the bank issued loans, and the Motherloaders decided for some reason to pull out their funds, the result would be disastrous.

"I don't like this." said Maurice Avellar. "That much wealth... and they came here armed only with a single 'Mech lance and a squadron of fighters?" He paused to reconsider. "One standard 'Mech lance, a LAM lance, and two fighter lances. The sheer arrogance of it! "

Hadisen Avellar frowned and puffed on his pipe. "For secrecy? That's stupid."

"I agree! That's far too little to guard this much wealth! They could have hired whole regiments for half of what they brought with them, no need to... this whole crazy business!" Lorenzo yelled, slamming his pudgy palms onto the table for emphasis. "And once word gets out, we've just become the biggest target for Pirates in the Inner Sphere since..."

"Since Motherload itself, you mean?" Brandon O'Leary replied casually.

"Who -are- these people?" Tori hissed.

"We don't know." President Avellar answered. He sighed. "Do we really need to know? Only further contact with them would tell us that. I'd rather we do business than discover just how dangerous they are at the point of a gun. Do you think the Alliance can afford to reject such overtures?"

Hadisen Avellar sighed. "No. Of course not. We should at least treat these Motherloaders as we would the Davions or the Kurita."

"And neither the Davion or the Kurita dare to pay in advance." Brandon O'Leary added again.

"We've played the Davions and Kurita against each other for centuries. We've never been invaded because we don't have anything worth the losses they'd be taking if someone does invade. Our worlds would be stretching out their borders and thinning their defenses, neither the Combine or the Federated Sun can use Alliance space to sneak in an attack into each other's unprotected flank." said Avellar. "Can we handle a third player in this game?"

"Who would send out a Regiment's worth of gold if they didn't care about being able to recoup their losses? We need to treat this as the threat it is!"

"This is why we're talking here before we break it open to the Parliament. The Military Review Board can't prevent you from selling outside the Alliance, and from how it stands we're more at risk from refusing sales compared to how much you'd be expanding our military with those. But I'm given to understand that all of you here were offered business opportunities on Antallos?"

"I don't have a problem with building their 'Mechs for them." said Brandon O'Leary. He didn't share the commitment to pacifism that the most of the Outworlders professed. "Building an entirely new Mech factory, twenty-five percent net profit to me, what, is the Parliament going to block investments outside of the Alliance now?"

The President shook his head. No, that's not a problem."

"It may be legal." Hadisen Avellar mused. "But asking us to make their weapons... is it immoral? Don't they know -anything- about the Alliance? Even if it's true that they've known of the Inner Sphere for just these past couple of years, this ignorance is insulting!"

"We could use all the money they're offering." Lorenzo Llewellyn added. "But I'm not sure if we really need it. It's too much. They - must- have something else in mind."

Neil Avellar nodded. "I called you here so we can bring together what they've been asking to get a clue on what these people really want."

They began to compare notes and impressions of their visitors. The Motherloders didn't act like anyone from the Inner Sphere, steeped in tradition and the wealth of their own inherited industries. Yet for a Periphery realm to have access to such resources was inexplicable. Why not pour that into their own defense industries instead of holding up a potential rival? A strong demand for Fusion Engines from Praxton was understandable. The Inner Sphere had an insatiable appetite for new Engines. What was more mysterious was why they

were offering war machines to the OWA. The 50-ton *GM BattleMech*, the 40-ton *Swan* fighter/trainer ASF, the 40-ton *Lanzenreiter* laser tank, the *Stinger LAM*. Maurice Avellar gnawed on his thumbnail speculatively then wrote onto a pad.

160 - Swan, Lanzer

200 - GM, Stinger LAM

"Of course these are the Engines they're asking from Praxton. But it's not just that, is it? Everything here seems to be designed for components we can easily produce inside the Alliance." He glanced briefly up at the CEOs. "Engines from Praxton, metals and armor from Sevon, Lasers from Lushann, electronics and chassis here in Alpheratz... everything's just a jump or two away. If we build them, we're going to be in control of the entire production chain."

"Or under obligation." Hadisen noted.

"It's too neat." the Ground Defense Arm commander added. "It's too convenient. Can't you see it? Producing all these machines here, it's like they expect us to eventually reserve some for our own use."

"And would that be a bad thing?" asked O'Leary.

"I... I don't know."

Neil Avellar rubbed at his forehead. "Expanding our defense industries would create jobs. If we do this, we're going to be dependent on finding buyers for these products."

Becoming warmongers too. It stuck in his craw, but while the agrarian nature of life in the Alliance had a veneer of idyllic simplicity, it was also one that suffered from the pain of hard labor and lack of medical facilities and infrastructure. Once the issue broke open into the Parliament, the citizens of the OWA would then have to face knowing their government was betraying the very foundations of their society just to give them more comfortable lives.

And yet, while he dreaded the inevitable backlash, that it would be inescapable meant he felt it would be worth it. Refusal would puff up

pride at sticking to one's moral scruples, but that wouldn't bring comfort to families with children dead from easily-treated diseases or left orphaned by pirate raids. Almost ten years since he took power, the honeymoon period was over; almost a decade of disillusion and futility. He just didn't have the resources to support any lasting changes.

Until now.

He was a reticent, nervous man who was known for not taking action without talking it over with his advisors. But before coming into that meeting he'd spoken with the person he trusted above all others... his mother. And she told him to do what was right to improve the lives of all the people in the Alliance, no matter their disapproval. It was his responsibility and burden, to be liked was a luxury that he couldn't afford anymore.

Hadisen puffed on his pipe some more. "Cousin, you're thinking of raising taxes, aren't you?"

Lorenzo looked up, frowning. "What? Why?! When for once you're not going to operating at a deficit?"

"Trade with Motherlode... it needs to show some clear benefit. It needs to be worth the danger that comes with accumulating material wealth."

"Some sort of 'Sin Tax', you mean?" Hadisen Avellar commented idly. "Looks like you're learning what it means to be greedy easy enough."

President Avellar sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "If the Motherlodgers are secure enough to throw around wealth like this, then I'd hate to see us dragged into what they'd consider problems. We'd be better off getting rid of all this fool's gold quickly, for something that's useful." The soul of the Outworlds Alliance was steeped in hard work and practicality, it would not be bought or cast aside so easily.

Rheinmetall Unterlüss Proving Ground

Germany, Earth, The Periphery

September 19, 2007/3022

The *Lanzenreiter* LZN-R1A rumbled through the 50 square-kilometer rough dirt clearing, its turret tracking a variety of targets. Mock-ups of buildings and hills served as cover, while shapes plated over with Standard Armor stood for enemy vehicles.

In many strange ways, the construction of a Fusion tank was actually simpler and easier than having to design a conventional MBT. Armor Achievements Europe, Ltd. (ARMAEUR) was the newly-founded company to produce a common 'universal' medium tank for use by GDI. Unlike previous tanks, which were single-hulled vehicles, the new Fusion tank was built on a 'skeleton' of BT foamed metal Internal Structure with armor layered over it. It was far lighter and roomier than a single-hull design and the box-hull meant that components could easily be switched out to have one chassis serve different duties. Even the turret could be hot-swapped for swift repair and refit.

Jullien Beauvais, one of the combat engineers just returned from Antallos, looked past the tank undergoing combat trials to its parked sibling, the *Lanzer W*, also known as the Lanzenwagen. It differed outwardly only in having a smaller turret, with pair of Medium Lasers. With capacitors and mountings for the Large Laser removed, it could now carry twelve troops in full gear along with a variety of support weapons and even a small medical bay.

The vehicle had treads, a bit taller than he'd like for a tank, but this *Lanzenreiter... Laser Panzer...* was no Main Battle Tank. It was little more than a long, angled box, a hull-frame that could serve both direct combat or for infantry support. Even the Lanzer A out on the range, with a Large Laser on its turret and sixteen tons of armor for defense, had enough stowage space at the rear for eight infantry or assorted supplies.

There was a quick flash. The observers all wore tinted goggles, as the visible light Large Laser lanced out against a target simulating an enemy tank coming out of cover. The effect happened too quickly to

notice, what they beheld was actually the lingering glow of ionized air after the attack had already hit.

"So, the Lushann Large Laser..." asked Beauvais. "Does it live up to expectations?"

"The Lushann Redbeam is bulkier and heavier than the Diverse Optics Large Laser intended for BattleMechs. It is a vehicle weapon." said Dr. Heinrich Volger. "It still ablates away half a ton of Standard Armor for each hit. It could be smaller so we can shrink the turret some more, but it is not a pressing issue. It is already much more resistant to damage than more compact BattleMech lasers."

Beauvais still doubted the utility of the Large Laser as main gun. Objectively, he knew that the laser could effortlessly slice through a conventional all-metal hull MBT and five more behind them, but the cooldown of several seconds before a Large Laser could fire again was such an agonizing delay. The front-hull Medium Laser may have better rate of fire and utility against lighter vehicles, but it had a limited firing angle. GDI demanded a cheap, multi-purpose medium tank with little logistics footprint however. The French proposal, the VAC/5 and SRM-4 carrying *Surin*, was passed over for the slightly slower and energy-weapon-only German *Lanzenreiter*.

Or almost, he surmised. The Lanzer still had a coaxial 20mm autocannon for anti-infantry work after all. The Laser Panzer could not hold true to its name until the return of Small Pulse Lasers.

"The Large Laser is devastating to us, but to the battlefields of the Inner Sphere, it is nothing special." continued Dr. Volger. "While the *Lanzer* has more than enough armor, it would be foolish for us to have it behave like a Main Battle Tank. It is an Infantry Fighting Vehicle."

"Then why not use something stronger? Can this laser not be made more powerful?"

"Some sort of Heavy Laser, you mean? We can attempt to make better lenses to improve its range slightly, but even the Inner Sphere have reached the limits of materials technology when it comes to beam

intensity. The PPC is a possibility, but it is expensive to acquire and difficult to maintain. We cannot add a second Large Laser without compromising on size, speed or armor protection."

Beauvais nodded reluctantly. The *Lanzer* won the bid by considering readily available technologies and offworld production instead of waiting for Earth's research and industries to catch up. Lushann Industrials would need to make a new version of their Redbeam Large Laser, or buy a license to produce a different Laser suitable for hotswapping with the *Swan* ASF, the *Lanzer* tank, and the *GM* 'Mechs... but it was just one more in the spread of investments ANP-TASC was making in the OWA.

In time, GDI high command hoped for clear parts commonality. The new GDI MBT (tentatively known as the *Marshall* heavy tank by the Americans) used quality over quantity to be able to fight 'Mechs straight on, but an IFV support/transport was the bedrock of all peacekeeping operations.

"We can now reliably produce Standard Structure and Armor, though still not in quantities we can call 'sufficient'. Just bring us the One Sixty-rated Engines and the Lasers and we will do the rest." Dr. Volger rubbed at his the underside of his lip as a contemplative reflex.

Fourteen tons of armor was even quite ridiculous for a 40-ton tank. With such paltry firepower, they'd designed the Lanzer A to survive long enough to blast away in unison. They could probably reduce the armor to just eleven tons, pack a dual purpose machingun AMS turrret, without losing much in practical protection... but that would reduce in internal infantry capacity from eight to just six due to having to carry the radar and FCS equipment internally.

"That's not good enough. We need these tanks to secure Antallos." replied the GDI inspector.

GDI for its new-found reputation as a young but determined military actually did not have much direct presence on Antallos. The bulk of their mobile attack power remained in the 'Mechs of the Foreign Legion and without the aid of the Azami, would not have managed

the recent victories against the other city-states of Antallos. Peace on a planet-wide level required the ability to make deeper, stronger patrols.

"Conventional Internal Combustion or Fuel Cell Engines are but a stopgap measure, the deep deserts of Antallos have more in common with wide ocean than land operations." Beauvais added with a sigh. "We have to think of oasis as more like islands, and resupply bases like ports of call. All those other independent city-states in Antallos still hate each other nearly as much as they hate us.

Only continued presence can deter them. While the threat of having quick-response DropShips touch down to deliver battalions to bust head is may keep them from obvious misbehaving, that does not provide us with real, ground-side awareness. Even with ARMAEUR and Alliance Defenders, only a factory on Antallos can make sure that there's nonstop production, and full readiness against whatever may happen."

Dr. Volger nodded. The *Lanzer* was nearly pointless on Earth for defense anyway. Antallos was the gateway, the honey trap that ensured Earth's safety. Alone, the *Lanzer* was not much of a threat. But at least eight of them, equivalent to a single 'Mech lance, moving and firing in concert should tell a different story.

"Many, many *Lanzers*. The simplicity of the design is geared for that, yes. It is out of our hands. It is uncomfortable to be so dependent on someone else for survival. I hope the Trade Mission communicated well the urgency of this."

More tanks, more fighters, more weapons, more, more, more! If the books were right, they had eight years before the next Succession War. If not, it didn't matter... the Inner Sphere was a savage sphere, and no peace could ever be trusted. Out there, somewhere, was the juggernaut known as the Clans. The Coalition needed friends in the Periphery if they hoped to survive the inevitable shitstorm.

Beauvais reached into his vest pocket and took out a cigarette. "Ah, let's hope they didn't make us sound too desperate. Our dignity may be a small price to pay, but that doesn't mean I want to smile as I'm

forced to beg."

**Coalition Space Administration Center
Florida, Earth
Grantville Cluster, The Periphery
June 10th, 2007/3022**

It had many names: Skywatch, Sol Guard, Cleansweep, Inter Planetary Police Initiative. It had as many as competing political agendas as, well, any other agency in the newly minted CSN. For Joshua Wilder, Skywatch's Chief Executive, it could have been worse... he could have been under the direct administration of the new Earth Space Agency, even if his own little domain had had nearly as many suggested names as that menagerie and that would have meant working under Nicholas Iversonn, with whom he had been feuding for years.

Of course, funding had been sparse anyway, as had been manpower, especially after the Columbus op returned. After all, they had for real pros now, and even if they weren't, well, Earth needed a space industry, yesterday – there was no time to do it cautiously. And, much like all the great undertakings, it would be paid for in blood if needed.

So maybe he was still a bit bitter about the last appropriations hearing. Truth was they were overstretched, there were a large number of bottlenecks and no easy way to solve them in the short term. But they moved onwards just hoping nothing would go wrong and, if it did, that they'd be able to limp back into shape.

And then, like clockwork, disaster hit. It was relatively minor; a miracle in disguise some would say. One of the Boeing Spheroid testbeds had some sort of malfunction and tore itself to pieces; full crew loss. What was more terrifying was the high-velocity debris passed very near Scaffold One, barely missing the structure by mere minutes.

It could have ended in a much larger catastrophe; worse, it could have cost them a chunk of precious space-based infrastructure. So the powers that be looked at whoever could step in, and the members of Skywatch were once again 'the Garbage Guys'. Stupid nicknames.

Collecting space garbage was their chief responsibility, at least for now - especially the stupidly-tough BT-grade junk that could easily survive re-entry and then hit the ground with the force of an airstrike. Hitting a populated area or a fragile-as-butterfly wings space platform was not so much a nightmare as it was a statistical inevitability. One that had sent half a dozen, and counting, safe recovery proposals back to the drawing board, as well as causing a nervous breakdown or two.

At least they had skirted the blame game, more or less. However, that had left Joshua Wilder in a tight spot, needing to not only produce something to stop any further fast-moving space hazards, but something more or less sellable to the committee. Yesterday, if not before that.

No pressure.

"Boss, you ok? Thought you had left an hour ago." Thomas Carr, Skywatch Senior Deputy asked with concern on his face.

"Still alive. Naw, was busy with some last minute research." He paused and held up a thumb. "I think I've found us our own Columbus expert."

"After your speech before Appropriations?"

"I insist on what I said; Star League Methods and Doctrines are likely to be either applied in a minimal fashion or not at all!" the Skywatch chief said in an overly exaggerated tone. "I don't think General Space Command liked being told their promises to fix their safety protocols are worth so much cow manure."

"...and yet we are getting our own ice cube to play with?" Thomas Carr answered in a dubious monotone.

"I said 'Methods and Doctrines' and meant that. Having the perspective of somebody with hands on experience? That's a whole different thing."

"Still, I thought Iversonn had gobbled up all the 'Oh Gee' specialists."

"Well, he did, more or less."

"He sharing?" Carr asked, almost hopeful.

"Not at this time," Joshua Wilder said with a slight frown. "According to him, they are still a critical component of the Exoplanetary Training Program."

"Figures, and if the workers die without Star League safety procedures..."

"...We have extras," Thomas finished with a wince.

"Callous and brutal." Such was life.

There were three main ways that you could classify the Columbus Survivors: there were those that had jumped back into the saddle and were active helping the nascent CSN learn the how to survive in this strange new future; those who, having had enough, had taken their money and chosen to disappear; and, finally, there were those that had wanted to help, but for one reason or another had been unable to do so.

Monica Sundengard was one of the latter.

"I was quite surprised by your request, Mr. Wilder," she said, looking quite prim with her hair tied back in an unflattering but practical bun. It was a spacer's habit.

"Call me Joshua, I'm not that old, even by our standards."

"Very well, Joshua, Call me Monica then." She paused and considered her next words carefully. "But I'm not sure what I can do to help, I was just a glorified cargo monkey..."

"It is a matter of perspective, you were a 'cargo monkey', and a Zero-G one that got to be Cargo Master, yes?"

"Well, yes, but..." she paused a moment, "look, if not for Amaris, I'd never been more than a regular Jump Monkey, I..."

"Doesn't really matter. We want your perspective and I do know you want to help. You did request to join the crews at Scaffold One," he said using the informal name of the hodgepodge that at one time had been the ISS, which was now being expanded to serve as Earth's low orbital cargo transfer station. "Multiple times, even."

"And I've been refused every time." she sighed.

"Too Valuable," they said in unison.

"You are a living legend, Monica" he said barely suppressing a smile, "Let me put it this way: have you been able to look at the current safety measures?"

She sniffed. "They're a joke."

"Yeah, they are, and while we have the Star League era regulations, well, they are largely useless to us. They presuppose too many things we simply don't have and some we can't even begin to guess the rationale behind them." Of all the Star League data recovered, the information on their regulations and procedures had been the most disappointing.

"Assuming there was one, which most of the time was dubious at best." She paused "For instance, look at the subsection C of the hazmat handling guide, it required us to have a published expert on the hazardous chemicals. Not just a HazMat expert or an expert on the specific goop; no, he had to be published!"

"I had thought some of the regulations weren't as streamlined as they could be and some were outright ridiculous..."

"More of the latter than of the former if you ask me."

"True enough, Monica. Still, this is why we need you; you know the stuff. Perhaps not academically, but you've lived through most of it and can help us avoid the worst of mistakes."

The former space worker shyly looked down. "Now I know you are buttering me up."

"Maybe a bit, but you can point at the obvious pitfall and we can pretend we had already seen it. That good enough for you?"

"I, well..."

"Come on, you want to help, this can be your chance."

She barely fought the smile this time.

The arrival of the Drakon changed the way the world saw itself, and provided a clear and present danger to quietly bury the hatchet between the different power blocs. Unsurprisingly, one of the most common fruits of this newfound spirit of cooperation was arms research. This was not only because there was the aforementioned real and present danger to the continued ways of life of all Earthlings, but because the technologies provided initially by Dana Zumross allowed them to propel a lot of theoretical and borderline-failure design concepts to somewhat successful completion.

The Tactical High Energy Laser, or THEL, was one of them.

Room-temperature superconductors and fusion technology had permitted the system to be miniaturized considerably. Gone were the trailers full of generators and other heavy equipment, now replaced with massive heat sink arrays. For all the improvements and its relatively low hitting power, THEL remained a considerable heat hog. Currently, the system was being earmarked as a battalion and headquarters defensive unit. There was also a strong inclination to

use it for artillery defense, but that remained in limbo until the generals involved could decide on the exact mission parameters. Some wanted increased output, so it could reliably threaten aerospace fighters. Others leaned towards improving the refire and target reacquisition rate to deal with the missile swarms common to the Inner Sphere. There was a few who pushed for a weapon capable of challenging artillery shells, missiles, and ASF, but those were allegedly being treated by Dr. Chin.

To Joshua Wilder those were details. Significant ones, but ultimately, ones that affected him very little. THEL and its associated technologies were, hopefully, part of the package they wanted to use to answer the 'Damocles' he had been tasked to solve.

"So, how does it look, Phil?" he asked the reedy man facing him. Phil Langsdale was the high energy physicist attached to his own team and had been in charge of their THEL experiments.

"Well, it ablates BT-grade debris enough, at least most compounds, but..." and there it was, the everpresent but.

"Don't like 'buts' Phil," Wilder murmured, having had enough of being stonewalled out of solutions. He didn't need any of that from his friends.

"Neither do I Josh, but I'm just not sure. We can use it to park the refuse in preset orbits, but-" and again, he empathized the last word, causing the Skywatch Chief to jerk back in reflex.

"Success rate?" Joshua Wilder said contemplatively, scratching his chin.

"That is the issue. With the ablative nature of most armor compounds, it's difficult to get a reliable estimate of how much we can do in any timeframe."

"I wouldn't worry about the armor. The flakes should burn up completely if they're caught by gravity and fall down the sky. Its the structural components that are the issue," Monica Sundengard interjected. She was still adapting to the nature of the office and the

work and was still so amazed at how... well, normal the people were, at least from her 28th century point of view. Sure, she should have seen it before, but back then she had been too busy moping about her ill luck.

"How big a flake?" Joseph asked with frown, a small one.

"Actually, I don't know."

"Then why are you so sure?" Phil asked her, genuinely curious.

Monica shrugged. "It has to do with the ablation pattern. You see, it expands, exposing more layers behind it, and then they all flake off all at once to shed heat away from the underlying material. That's how armor protects the insides from transferring the heat from lasers and PPCs. Get them to separate into small enough pieces, and the layers disintegrate all on their own even if there's no material to protect anymore."

"Hmmm... that might mean..." Phil begun. "There's still the diamond underweave, but..."

"Phil, you're mumbling," Joshua reminded him with a poke. "Speak up man, we need that brain of yours."

"Sorry Josh, but, yeah, she's right. I think I can give you an idea of the burn up threshold, but that doesn't change some of the issues of the laser sweeper," he said using the their designation for the THEL.

"Oh?"

"Well, with the way it ablates, that makes the orbit adjustment problematic. We might send them toward work orbits by error, or even start a Kessler cascade ourselves," he said referring to perhaps the worst case scenario. Between BT-grade materials and the push to build fast and dirty, the possibility of something like it happening was getting serious. This was compounded by their less than stellar attempts at synthesizing BT-grade materials, particularly armors. They would ablate, but parts would ablate faster than others, or far more explosively than expected. In space, that meant giving the

fragments thrust; likely a different one than intended. So instead of a parking orbit or a re-entry orbit, the fragments could end up anywhere else and, the longer it passed before said miss-orbits could be corrected, the bigger the odds it would hit something else, be it other space junk or infrastructure still in use.

Joshua raised his hand. "That's an on-duty astronomic awareness issue, Phil, not a technical limitation. Look, give me the how small a fragment can re-enter and I'll see about running some tests. And what about the structurals, Monica?"

"Well, they are treated to be somewhat heat resistant. Nowhere near armor grade, but are far denser, so possibly better survival chance of re-entry." She paused. "Heat sink component might be the biggest danger, I think."

It was a consequence of how fast and far the Terran Alliance had developed fusion technology; neither their own heat sink technology nor that of their successors had never been able to catch up. They ended up with more power than they'd ever need, or want, as far as vacuum operations were concerned. That translated to a desperate need to shed heat in the void, where their heat sinks worked at only one-tenth efficiency compared to normal ground-side operations, and an overabundance of heat sinks were required just to keep heat levels manageable.

"And do you have any idea how the League dealt with it?"

"Ideally from not fighting in low orbit, and the New Earth Conventions," Monica said as if it explained everything, and it did.

It had been a surprising revelation, the Conventions had been a follow up of the Ares own during the League's time, but had been repealed by the House Lords after the dissolution of the League and had, instead, adopted an unofficial variant of the Ares Accords with DropShips often engaged far from the planet or after re-entry. This reduced the danger of unpredictable crashes and re-entry of fragments.

"But assuming you did?" Joshua asked.

"There were automated system in place, Rumor said it was the predecessor of the Caspar systems, but that's so over my paygrade it isn't even funny. I do know it was meant to deal with accidents mostly"

"An intercept system?" This time it was Phil's curiosity that sparked the question. "That is a possibility, use armored drones, ram the big pieces or even retrieve them..." the scientist paused for a second before he began, optimistically, "Hey Josh..."

"Natsuki at Boeing was working on that for us, she was somewhat optimistic, but we will have to see how much of an retrieval ends up being." he said

"I think it is the best of our current options," interrupted Thomas Carr. The Deputy had been quiet most of the meeting, having been going over his notes and, in part, waiting for the present moment. "Now, listen to me," he said raising his hands. "We need a platform for the sweeper. We lack the budget for massed drones, and even then that is just to push them to parking orbits."

"Tom, if you think we lack the budget for drones..." Joshua started. "why do you think we will get it for enough ships and crews?"

"I know, I know, but think the big picture" Thomas was now getting exited. "Look, drones are by and large disposable. you can't make them cost effective and armor them. We simply can't make this drones anywhere near cheap. And you know how much appropriations likes that, even if it is a very good option. So we need something that will last, will perform the job and that, if needed, will pull other jobs."

"A modular Small Craft, like the one Natsuki is working, in other words, the manned one, that is."

"Exactly. Plus an on site crew could evaluate what to do," Phil spoke, "and could take measures in case of anomalous ablation" he added excitedly, considering what Natsuki said of the prototype Small Craft Fusion Engine that Boeing was prototyping. "Even small manned

utility craft that can only deal with what's in front. The power of a fusion reactor would be useful. The laser could slice up some of the debris, the intercept vehicle could push or scoop up the pieces, and do it quicker than any conventional rocket-powered craft. And it should be tough enough to take any accidental impact from a debris field."

"Hmm... an on-site crew, meaning rotating shifts on one spacecraft. So, 24 hours operation? How many of these vessels and how many crew would you need?" asked Monica.

"Why?" Phil asked in return.

"Well, any large intercept vehicle could work as a general purpose transport too, right? If you can net debris, you can haul cargo boxes. I mean, you are all worried by the lack of training facilities and crew slots, this gets you the chance to get some practical experience in."

"Hmmm... ok, you guys have a point," the Space Safety Chief Executive said. "Intercept would also let us recover the old sats, specially the once built under the new ISO specifications" he said referring to the new 7P or 'Seven Plagues' specifications. It was sometimes surprising how things that started off as a joke, in this case a downgrade of what was seen as the Inner Sphere seemingly proofing their equipment against Ragnarök itself, ended up turned into a brand new set of ISO certificates. "Draft me a proposal and I'll see about setting up a meeting with appropriations. "

Actually, the idea of the intercept had been somewhat attractive to Wilder . It was mostly dismissed before the Drakon, given that interception with chemical rockets was expensive and difficult, in the now, with a fusion torch drive? Not so much. Actually, none at all, if you factored how efficient those engines could get. Of course, that assumed Natsuki's prototype did its work as advertised.

But between the 'Cargo Tug' angle Monica had suggested, and the possibility of turning those craft into customs or police cutters latter on, yeah, he felt he had something that could pass by the committee.

Well, assuming there were enough Primitive Reactors to go around,

but they were supposedly in the clear for those.

There was just one last thing-

"Oh, Phil, before I forget."

"Yeah boss."

"Don't call it Toy Box, OK?"

The Badlands, Antallos
The Periphery
4 January, 3024/2008

The skies broke over Antallos.

The crack of a sonic boom lingered across the cloudless expanse, and three contrails rose high. Higher and higher, until the air itself began to thin and the blueness of the sky began to fade off into purple. The first to veer off was the aircraft to the left; the *VF-01 LAM's* Hybrid Engine was best suited for atmospheric operations. Its thrusters were airbreathers, and in space it only had enough fuel to perform an orbital insertion. It turned back to land back on Port Krin's airbase.

Its twin on the left continued to match speed with the lead fighter, breaking through the blue life-giving envelope into the harsh void. There, the two remaining AeroSpace Fighters pushed their engines to their maximum recommended thrust. They were two flaming arrows; one stubby and matte black, the other slightly more slender and flat white. Slowly, the *SWN-01 Swan* began to fall behind, its thrusters stoked by a Nissan 120 fusion engine to a limit of 4 Gs of maximum acceleration. The other was GDI's main attack fighter, the BearCat, ten tons lighter but was powered by the same type of 120-rated Fusion engine. It edged forward with a half-G advantage, a gap that grew long as the broke free of the pull of gravity.

"Platform *Silent Cradle*, this is GDI ASF *BearCat* Zero, authorization Alpha Alpha Alpha, requesting clearance for docking." the pilot wheezed through his radio.

In the distance was an odd assembly of cylinders and tubes, with a large broad disc at the middle. Thicker towards its center, tapering off to only ten meters thick at the rim, the grav-deck supported fifty 1G sleeping rooms. The station's rotation was countered by solid counter-rotating rings at its rim. "This is Orbital Platform *Silent Cradle*, we are ready to receive you in docking strip A."

On either side of the habitat assembly were little more than long hollow metal boxes. These were refurbished and lengthened Small

Craft Bays salvaged from old JumpShips. The *BearCat* flipped over to point its engines in the direction it was heading, burning off its velocity. Slowly, precisely, it entered the orbital cradle.

The small station held geosynchronous orbit above Port Krin. The engineers who designed it had termed it an 'aerospace cradle'. According to traditional definitions, mobile airstrips were carriers and fixed installations were bases; the cradle was not quite either. Although it lacked even a station-keeping drive, and was thus unable to move under its own power, it could easily be towed from one orbital position to another as necessary.

Everyone who worked within knew it would be targeted first and likely lost in a serious attack against the planet. Nevertheless, the cradle was secure in a way no ground-based airfield could match, and its flight wing could respond much faster than any fighter that had to first fight gravity before entering the combat zone. There was also that the fighters held within were entirely home-built, finally freeing GDI from its reliance on the eclectic collection of fighters they had bought for themselves off of the Inner Sphere open market, or the assistance of their tenuous Azami allies.

Down below, a small group of infantry fighting vehicles entered the Badlands, the wild scraggly desert near the equator. What it gave in slighter better distribution of oases, it more than made up for in toxic WMD-blasted former farmland, deformed and demented Zone Gangers, and fearless predator animals. They guarded a convoy of salvage specialists towards what might have been a Star League base. As the location was vague at best, Port Krin's dedicated planetary deployment DropShip put them down near a group of sand-buried installations.

"It's chewin' on the lidar mount!" said Sgt. Puddle from inside one of the *LZN-01 Lanzer* tanks. "Someone get up there and blast the beastie."

"Crickey." said Cpl. Tage, and grabbed a shotgun. He opened up the top hatch and instantly the hole was savaged by a veritable storm of

beaks and claws. He laughed and began to shoot up through the gap. "Come on, ya dire budgies, have a cracker!"

While Antallos was not yet completely secure, GDI did believe they had some peace of mind. It was just 2008, four more years until the Fourth Succession War. With the Inner Sphere afire with war again, the Succession Lords would be far too busy against each other again to divert any serious force to threaten their little portion of the Periphery. There were only a few time-critical tasks left to do, and these were mostly to take advantage of certain opportunities in the timeline.

Vatican City
Terra
March 15, 3025

The Roman Catholic Church and the New Avalon Catholic Church long debated hotly on the issue of papal succession. While on occasion the conflict on which Pope held final earthly authority would turn hostile, for the most part relations between the more scholarly priesthood was cordial. Their theological studies were identical, after all. Correspondence was regular between Terra and New Avalon, brought over at standard HPG rates. Only a few of these were encrypted, mostly articles that were to be published in each others' periodicals.

On this day a perfectly normal letter was sent, from Fr. Rolando Silvio to Fr. Jack Greenberg on New Avalon. It was a continuation of their friendly debate regarding relics of faith. Around the middle of the message was a perfectly innocuous passage, to wit:

Whether or not the fabled Shroud of Turin was a medieval fabrication, it is no longer possible for us to determine. However,

though the object was lost it was never more than just a symbol of Christian belief. It is Christ that brings us power and knowledge, it is not the relics themselves that possess any special qualities. *Whether or not the Shroud of Turin was an extraordinary claim, that Christ died and lived again is the bedrock of our faith, and such a Holy Shroud must have existed.* Relics are not meant to be proof, they are reminders. It is Christ that brings to the faithful the strength to act on their beliefs, to know right from wrong, and correct injustice.

[* italics do not appear in the message itself]

Galatea
Lyrans Commonwealth
April 07, 3025

ComStar HPG Standard Message [encryption level A]

To: Mitch DeChevilier
CO 12th Star Guards
From: Henry Calmer
GDI External Affairs

Greetings and good health.

The Coalition of Sovereign Nations has been made aware of the expiration of your contract with the Federated Sun. We do not seek to interfere with your plans, if to sign back with Davion or move on to other pastures, perhaps the Commonwealth; but please consider our proposal. If you are willing to split your regiments, we would be most grateful to have a unit of such renown and expertise training our military forces currently standing ready on Antallos.

We offer full Assault pay for a Cadre contract, paid half in advance. We require at least one full regiment for two years for such exercises, but if you would rather not split your forces, then we are prepared to employ all four of your regiments (at the same rate) for instruction, merchant protection, and clearing the Periphery of all its pirate scum. There is also plenty of work in Antallos for your famed engineering detachments. We have confidence you will find it a low-risk but very interesting and very rewarding assignment.

We offer you this contract because your mercenary unit is reportedly formed from the Regular Army of the Star League Defense Forces. We are very much interested in the Star League's methods and traditions that may survive within you. We offer more than generous pay and support, perhaps even access to lostech, for nothing less than the most intensive, unrelenting, and authentic training regimen that the Inner Sphere can offer.

***Unity Palace, Imperial City, Luthien
Pesht Military District, Draconis Combine
16 December, 3025/2009***

Takashi Kurita entered the Black Room of House Kurita, a place of ultimate secrecy. He had no doubt every other Lord had something like it, deep within their palaces. His own was layered behind a maze of corridors, false walls and holograms, and it was specially formulated black paint made to foil microwave transmissions that gave the room its name. Within waited his war council - the director of the Internal Security force, the ineffable Subhash Indrahara, and the five Warlords of the Draconis Combine's five Military Districts.

This was not a meeting that could be made lightly, for though Luthien was the heart of the Draconis Combine it was also many Jumps away from the district capitals where each Warlord carried out his own responsibilities. Calling them to attend this meeting imposed on them several months wasted just in transit time. Inwardly, Takashi smiled. His time was all the more valuable, and his Warlords could reflect on their proper place on the way back. It

would do them good to get back in touch with patience and humility, and more importantly the time spent away from their regions would force them to reschedule whatever plots they had going on.

He took his place at the head of the table, and greeted each warlord in turn by order of seniority. He heard their reports and waited as they bickered over each others' performance and pontificated on matters of interest to the Combine... which coincidentally seemed to align with what was most beneficial to their respective districts.

Indrahar rose from his seat to take the floor. After polishing the archaic spectacles he affected, he favored the assembly with a brief smile.

"The correlated data secured from the raids on Davion BattleMech facilities on Quentin and Hoff have proven beyond a doubt that a technology transfer is occurring between the Federated Suns of House Davion and the Lyran Commonwealth of the Steiners. Captured documents of recent date contain data from the Lyran facilities on Hesperus II, Coventry, and Alarion. These documents were found at both raid sites. One Steiner technical file even carries a citation by Doctor Robert Willis, a Davion scientist last reported to be working in the Federated Suns' top-secret BattleMech development program.

This document refers to a new Davion heavy battlemech, named the Rakshasa. It is a seventy-five-ton '*Mad Cat*' derivative with firepower approaching that of an Assault 'Mech. It appears to have been designed for use within the Draconis March."

Takashi raised his right eyebrow. It was pointless to ask if it was true, since his old friend wouldn't have dared to speak out without some intensive cross-checking. "You are correct, that is some... interesting information."

"One might even say it reeks of conspiracy from the Periphery."

It was no secret that Samsonov, Warlord of Galedon, was dissatisfied with the Combine's current policies on mercenaries and little Periphery states - both were traditionally to be exploited and claimed without hesitation. He'd kept his grumbling down to the level before outright criticizing Takashi's decisions, however. He presented

himself as the voice of caution. Subhash Indrahhar looked faintly annoyed for a moment.

"NAIS has never been known to resist stealing a good idea from wherever they may find it." the ISF Director replied. "I find it unlikely that New Avalon would require help from a Periphery nation just to produce a new 'Mech. From the reports, it is not a 'FrankenMech' but an entirely new design." He turned to look at Takashi. "While for now a new 'Mech is unlikely to offer any advantages on the strategic level, sharing technology between Steiner and Davion can prove to be disastrous in the long run. These point to a deeper and stronger bond between the two Houses we've seen. It's possible that Prince Hanse Davion has agreed to more than just the cease-fire proposal of 3020, though there are no formal signs yet of such an agreement. Steiner and Davion have little to gain from military adventure against each other but so far all of the benefits seem to favor the Lyran Commonwealth. Surely the Davion fox has a deeper plan."

Takashi nodded. The strongest economy in the Inner Sphere working with the military and intellectual might of the Federated Suns would be a potent combination indeed. Newer, more effective 'Mechs from the NAIS brain trust might even begin to counteract some of House Steiner's rampant incompetence in the field. House Kurita's borders were up against Steiner and Davion, and so far it was the lackluster performance of the Commonwealth that allowed Takashi to station better troops towards the Davions' Draconis March.

He waited for his Warlords to quiet down and waved for Indrahhar to continue.

"In the matter of the campaign on Galtor- all media coverage has been satisfactorily contained by the Voice of the Dragon. We may have lost the Star League cache, but it has cost Davion." He purposely gave Samsonov no opening to lay blame on anyone else. While it might have normally been a relief not to be called out on being part of a disastrous campaign, Indrahhar knew just how much the Coordinator's council loved to hear their own voices. "The people believe we have won a resounding victory, and no one can tell them otherwise."

"The campaign on Galtor has not ended to our benefit, but House Davion too is weakened by this misadventure. We will allow them no rest, and for this I assign the Fifth Sword of Light to Dieron." Takashi glowered at Vasily Cherenkoff. "They are to raid throughout the corridor that Davion maintains to Terra. If a weakness is found, exploit it. Our friends in the Capellan Confederation and the Free Worlds League will be encouraged to attempt similar probes. If we can cut off Davion and Steiner from one another, it will nullify the threat of any alliance between them."

"*Hai.*" the corpulent Warlord tried to bow.

None of them there expected much from the Free Worlds League, whose internal issues born out of constant political infighting crippled most of its ability to wage war. The Capellan Confederation might have greater desire to hurt the Davions, but Liao's military power was as proportionate to the smallest power among the Great Houses of the Inner Spheres. In unity, in perfect movement at the direction of the Chrysanthemum Throne, that was the strength of the Draconis Combine. Takashi had no doubt that in the end the fate of the Inner Sphere would rest upon Kurita's actions. It was he alone that could contain the threat of the Steiner-Davion alliance. Takashi made perfunctory remarks and rebukes through the rest of the rote proceedings. Finally it looked as if Samsonov would break from having the elephant in the room remain undiscussed.

Wolf's Dragoons.

From all accounts, Wolf's Dragoons' service in the Lyran Commonwealth was profitable if unexciting. Not even the combat prowess of the Dragoons could overcome the infirmities of Steiner command. He looked towards Samsonov and inwardly smiled. He remembered meeting Colonel Wolf, and was impressed at such a warrior. Wolf would certainly have put Samsonov in his place. The Warlord's sense of self-importance was far too high for someone who had not served on the front lines for quite some time. His exploits on Galtor did not show much inspiration.

"*Tono*, there is one more matter that I believe merits your attention—Wolf's Dragoons." Samsonov dared to speak at last.

In his heart, Takashi even envied Jaime Wolf, who was free to fight and earn his own glory as a warrior. The mercenary might not have the honor and power due to the Coordinator of the Draconis Combine, a ruler worthy of becoming the new First Lord of the whole Inner Sphere, but neither did he have to deal with the tangle of political intrigue and his officers constantly bickering like children, constantly attempting to reinterpret his orders to only benefit themselves.

"Warlord Samsonov, your attempt last year to place them under your control was uncalled for. I am satisfied with their combat record." said Takashi. "Their raids along the Davion border to your district have stalled the Federated Suns in that region. They dig themselves deep into foxholes, wary for any attack." *And don't you think I don't know the Dragoons are forced to raid for the supplies you had denied them* - a cold fury in Takashi's eyes communicated. "Do you wish to raise the issue of their intractability again?"

"*Ie, Tono!* I would not dream of refusing to hear and obey your wisdom." Samsonov quickly replied, the thinning of his lips belying his words. "I am speaking only of concern - for their loyalty. Have it been brought to your attention that they have sent out an officer to Galatea - the so-called 'Mercenary's Star'?"

Takashi nodded. "This has been brought to my attention." Surprisingly, from both Subhash Indrahara and through correspondence from his distant cousin in the Periphery.

Eventually it was raised in their conversation, speaking 'hypothetically', that an organization as large and possessing of its own culture as the Wolf's Dragoons cannot be brought to heel in a hurry. Hurrying or using force would perhaps just destroy the strength that one was seeking to control. A lifetime's work would create strong bonds, debts of honor that link generations, rather than just mundane debt from lack of supplies. A man may flee his creditors, but not his conscience.

Takashi laughed inside. As if his cousin could not be any more obvious. *'Was he really speaking of the Wolf's Dragoons... or himself?*

House Ryan's grip on their little polity might not hold for much longer.'

"I understand that there are two more years before their contract expires, and they are looking for new employers. It is indeed a risk that they may be turned against us, and that losing them would weaken our border with the Davions. I have considered this." The DCMS lacked the sort of fast-attack and tactical adaptability displayed by the Dragoons. "While they are still under contract, we shall employ them as teachers. We shall create a new unit that will fight as Wolf's Dragoons do, and so add Dragoon capabilities to the Arm of the Dragon. "

Takashi very slowly and deliberately laid his palm flat on the table. "Their Liaison Officer shall command it. As he already has some experience in observing Wolf's methods, he has a head start." He nodded briefly to Samsonov. "I shall entrust their care to you, General Samsonov. While you may use them as you see fit along the Galedon district, they must be allowed to operate in the manner that the Dragoons do, so that we may observe where we may further... improve upon... the effects of their discipline."

The Coordinator leaned back slightly. *'Careful now'*, he reminded himself. *'Wound Samsonov's pride too terribly and he is likely to do something foolish to recover his standing.'* He put folded his hands behind his voluminous sleeves. "General Samsonov, I expect you can find a suitable officer to fill the new liaison position."

The Galedon Warlord's face lightened.

Takashi did not know what devious plan had just entered Samsonov's mind, but it was clear that inspiration had struck.

"I have just the man for the job," Samsonov said.

"Then we are all in agreement. If there is no further business to discuss, then-"

"On that note, Coordinator, I too have something I would like to propose."

Takashi looked faintly surprised at Subhash Indrahara. As the Director of the ISF, Indrahara normally concerned himself with behind-the-scenes security. To speak in the open he had to have some reason above currying the Coordinator's favor. "Speak, then."

"Your policies regarding soft absorption are benefiting the combined greatly, Coordinator. The supply of *Jenner* frames and both *Lightning* and *Seydlitz* AeroSpace Fighters from the Periphery have increased by fifty percent over the past year. Metals and grain are coming in from fresh investments in the Outworlds Alliance, and there is still room for further expansion. House Davion's attempts to counter your deals are suffering from friction with their own corporate interests from within Davion space."

Samsonov grit his teeth, while the other Warlords merely looked curious at what Subhash Indrahara hoped to gain from this flattery. Was he being ironic? No, not even he would dare.

"It is written in the Dictum Honorium that those are not aligned with the Dragon are opposed to the Dragon." continued Indrahara. "There is another offering from the Periphery shows that seek to further align themselves with us."

"This is an insult." hissed Samsonov.

"This is a proposal by Chandrasekhar Kurita." Indrahara reminded Samsonov. Even the Warlord of Galedon had to beware of criticizing the Coordinator's own cousin, who was steadily gaining wealth and influence even he dallied out in the Periphery. "We are in a position to conduct a little technology sharing of our own, with only benefits on our end. As Chandrasekhar Kurita wrote; 'they are as unto children seeking approval from their parents.' I too ask our Coordinator to tolerate such ignorance to bring them further under the light of our guidance."

Takashi nodded.

"We have already purchased and put to test several of their *GM* Medium BattleMechs. Now, GDI would like to offer a lance of their new *Wild Cat* Heavy BattleMechs and two lances of their second-

generation *GMs*, for field testing. As Chandrasekhar Kurita has already arranged for access to the LAM factory on Irece, a lance of *VF-1* LAMs will also be provided for assault recon. These 'Mechs will be completely under our control, but for one condition."

"What is this condition?" asked Takashi.

"As befits field testing, they ask that the 'Mechs be placed against a variety of situations but the data must survive. Training against the Dragoons fulfills this requirement. Piloting and deployment are under the command of the Combine, all they ask is that their technicians be the ones to oversee the machines."

Everyone knew that the Coordinator looked upon Antallos and the Coalition very favorably, like watching over an overenthusiastic puppy chasing its own tail. It amused Takashi greatly to see the upstart Periphery nation try to know everything about the Inner Sphere. Perhaps, in his private moments, he relished the thought of them panicking at seeing the great strength and scale of warfare among the Houses. They would come to realize that survival could only come from bowing their heads to his decrees.

Takashi smiled thinly. "A single company of no consequence. I have not been much impressed with their previous design, but it has proven its usefulness among less experienced units. I admit to being curious as to what recovered lostech they want to show off this time." Like little children showing off, hoping for attention from their elder sibling. Takashi was in an indulgent mood.

"I must ask however, why do you bother this council with such trifles?" asked Kester Hsiun Chi, the Warlord of the Pesht District. "I have received some of their machines, and I am... not displeased... with their performance thus far. This remains a small administrative matter, not something for review at this level."

The old man often interested in what was happening outside of his district, but without showing any signs of wanting more. Throughout the meeting Takashi was getting hints of deeper devious intellect from the old man, and wondered if he was being wasted on such a peaceful prefecture.

"Chandrasekhar has hinted that GDI is a great desire to test themselves against the Dragoons, some of the most adaptable warriors in the Inner Sphere. The Dragoons are also highly secretive, to the point that not even the Fox..." nor the ISF, his tone grudgingly implied "has managed to insert an agent into their midst. That our 'friends' from the Periphery are willing to go so far as to surrender to us their own machines and technicians, to be picked apart at our leisure... whose military do they really want to observe? The Dragoons, or the Dragon?"

Vasily Cherenkoff, Warlord of Dieron, scoffed. "As the Coordinator has said, a single company is insignificant, so would it not be prudent to refuse?"

"We have no need for their pathetic little trinkets." Samsonov added forcefully.

"Pathetic? I would rather have such tribute than none at all." Kester Chi raised an eyebrow and leaned back, lacing his fingers together under his nose. It hid the smirk that was obvious to all.

The Pesht Military District, though it contained Luthien, capital of the Draconis Combine, was a region far from the wars that the Dragon waged. It was the one to benefit most from the second-line 'Mechs being delivered from the Periphery, to relieve more capable machines and MechWarriors to fight at the front lines. The amount of Jenners the combine received each year had tripled, the LAMs that Irece produced had doubled. The GM BattleMechs were proving their worth as garrison 'Mechs. The Anti-Missile Systems and CASE technology, were they not useful? His forces, though green, were the ones to benefit most of new machines and new technologies that made 'Mechs that much harder to kill.

Seeing a sore point, Cherenkoff continued "But perhaps it will do no harm to prod the Dragoons at someone else's expense."

Samsonov clenched his jaw, and seeing the Coordinator's sharp calculating gaze forced himself to calm down. *How dare these Periphery upstarts once again undeservedly force themselves into the*

business of House Kurita!

They were trash, not worth any attention. With his failure to seize control of the Dragoons, then with the Coordinator's new unit, plus this intrusion from the Periphery - it was as if they all wanted to dilute his control over the Galedon district.

"Better the enemy that you know, than the enemy you do not know." said Takashi Kurita.

And what does he mean by that? Samsonov pondered grimly.

"Even though I wish to see a Combine unit with the capabilities of Wolf's Dragoons, I do not want to lose the service of those mercenaries," Takashi announced. He hoped that his statement would keep Samsonov from any excesses. He turned to Indrahhar.

"Director Indrahhar, see what can be done to persuade the Dragoons to stay. Encourage them to see that their future lies with the Draconis Combine. If they cannot be persuaded, we should have some sort of insurance in case the Dragoons decide to enter an enemy's service." Takashi spoke as he rose from his seat. This time, no one offered an interruption.

Takashi watched as his councilors left the room. The Warlords' squabbling was a necessary evil. While they were busy watching each other, they were not planning revolution. He found it a disheartening, but necessary strategy. If only he could trust them to have no ambitions for the Coordinator's seat. If they would unite together behind him, no power in the Inner Sphere could stand against the Dragon.

An idle wish, he mused. If they did not show ambition commensurate with their ability, they would not have been chosen for their posts. A ruler that sits uneasy on his throne cannot afford to be unwary. Such foolish trust had doomed the Star League; that stupid Cameron boy and his councilor Amaris.

College of Engineering, New Avalon Institute of Science
New Avalon, Federated Commonwealth
13 November 3022

Quentin Watson and his co-professor Robyn Leewood circled the incomplete prototype frame for the Sun Cat, a checklist on their shared clipboard as they examined the skeletal internal structure and myomer muscles that gave the impression of a skinless, naked body without the weapons and armor to gird it. On the back of the Mech was an empty void where the fusion engine would go. In its place was a mass of power cables that hung from the ceiling to provide energy, and enough dead weight to simulate the mass of the engine for motive tests.

Off to one side, the failed Moon Cat project was in a far greater state of decomposition, parts of the Mech being salvaged for use by the more successful design. The combined efforts of the now reunified teams had bounded the Sun Cat ahead by several months. Right now, the two senior engineers were going down their list to make sure that everything was safe and in place.

It was lunch, so the student body was off socializing, eating and catching up on their studies, leaving the two of them alone. The floor of the construction foundry was a mess, a result of the need to pretty much hand-build this new machine from the ground up. The NAIS foundries had been tapped to provide materials, but in the end, it was up to the thirty-odd students that made up this particular class to do all the actual construction. And even if none of them passed this course, they would still be Mech engineers and repair men of an elite stature.

Quentin flipped through the checklist to the list of proposed revisions to the current design at the bottom. He huffed at one, glancing up at the 'chin' of the Mech, where the connective tags for a Small Laser were hanging out like some vague beard. At Robyn's questioning look, he showed her the sheet. "Strip a half-ton of armor off an replace that laser with a flamer? What's.... Oh." She grinned a little bit at the quickly drawn image of a finished *Rakshasa* breathing fire over *Capellan Infantry*. *"All right, I can see that. Like some sort of*

dragon."

"Better not tell the Kuritas. They might throw a fit and get a heart attack that we're taking over their symbol. On second thought, let's!" Quentin laughed at his joke, the sound failing to echo in the sound-proofed room.

"Oh, what should I tell Takashi Kurita, next I taunt him?" Quentin and Robyn froze in terror at the surprise voice. A voice that did not belong to any student of theirs or one of their fellow teachers. Instead, they recognized it as the voice of the most powerful man in the Inner Sphere.

Both teachers leaped to a standing position, ramrod straight in the presence of their Lord, Hanse Davion. Lord Davion waved for them to return to their former positions, saying "Sit, sit you two. I'm not here to do anything negative or rash. Just here to check up on your project. And no!" he raised his hands defensively, preemptively shorting out any possible unwanted connotations to his previous statement. *"I'm not here to judge anything. I just want to see how things are going, and if there is anything I can do to help it along."*

Robyn and Quentin shared a nervous glance before awkwardly sitting back down in a very informal meeting with Lord Davion, who in turn took a seat on a box containing a Class-10 Autocannon that had been slated for the failed Mech. "Well sir, Highness, My Lord. Ah, what did you want to know? To talk about?" Robyn broke into the conversation hesitantly, still in shock over Davion's presence. *She glanced about, looking for all the security guards that were supposed to swarm around the House Lord, but couldn't see any of them.*

Hanse, for his part, gestured at the Sun Cat while leaning back in a friendly manner. "Just that, really. I mean, I will admit that I was surprised when the approved proposal for this came across my desk. I have every confidence that NAIS can out do a Periphery nation, that seems like a given. So I had some free time come up so I decided to spend it here at the Institute and catch up on some things. And how is it?"

Quentin remembered that the initial proposal had been made months ago, so Lord Davion showing up now did seem like a reasonable surprise. Just that no one told him. Or Robyn, by the way her mouth was silently working and facial expressions. So for the moment he decided to work

with this as it appeared to be – one of the higher-ups at NAIS wanted an informal briefing on an active project that they had oversight on. And that was something that he could do. As long as he didn't think too hard about just who he was talking to.

"Well, Your Highness, the Sun Cat is in late Alpha construction and testing. We are working on optimal Myomer placement to best balance the entire Mech as well as making sure that the bird-joined legs are working properly. This class doesn't have a lot of experience with the Marauder class of Mechs, so I've deliberately limited their access to that information to that they can be encouraged to work out the problems they encounter from first concepts." Hanse seemed to be paying attention, actual real attention to what was being said, rather than the bland expression of a man who wasn't interested in what was being talked about.

"The layout of the basic internal structure was very easy, but one of our subgroups is experimenting with an improved foot to allow for better grip on non-flat surfaces." He indicated the portion of the Mech in question, and was surprised with Davion got up and asked to be shown it. And when a House Lord 'asks', things got done. So Quentin and Robyn got up and quickly attached a winch to the appendage, raising it up to show Hanse.

He bent to examine the actuators and irregularly shaped base plating, asking how it was supposed to work. Robyn explained that the new design didn't fix the foot hard to the leg, but a series of small gimbals allowed the foot and toes to flex around irregular ground that couldn't be simply crushed under the 70t weight of the Sun Cat, and allow it a small degree of better stability on rough terrain.

Hanse nodded his approval at this development. "Every little thing helps" he said, then turned to look at the Mech proper. "How about her weapons? And Armor? I heard you talking about replacing a Small Laser with a Flamer. Why?"

Robyn found her steady voice. "Well sir, the default configuration we were working on, the SCT-01X, involves thirteen-point-five tones of armor, a pair of 10-shot LRM launchers in the shoulders and Large Lasers in the arms. There's a proposal from one of the students to change the anti-infantry weapon, and well, see for yourself." In a bold move, she showed

Hanse the fire-breathing cartoon, which caused the House Lord to smile.

"I do like that. But so much armor on the design? I don't think you can put any more on, and what about the Heat sinks. You're not running a coll design here."

"Yes, my Lord Davion. It was decided early on to maximize the protection on the Sun Cat in accordance with the newly developing Assault-Heavy paradigm style Mech. Maximize armor with the heaviest weapons we can fit onto it. And she runs heat-neutral through an Alpha Strike, except at a full run."

"What do you have in mind for alternate weapon loadouts?" Hanse found a ladder propped up against the side of the Mech, and carefully ascended, looking down into the empty arms. "Your current setup is extremely focused on long-range combat."

Robyn nodded while holding the ladder steady. "The students chose this, your Highness. But your concerns have already been raised in class discussion. There is a tentative alternate design based around a more close-range weapon's design, maintaining the armor for protection. Three six-packs of SRMs, sharing two tones of ammo and a half-dozen Lasers. At close range, that design would tear any assault Mech apart." She seemed pleased with her declaration.

"That is good to hear. Ah, but that reminds me. There was another reason why I wanted to come talk with you about making your project go faster." Hanse descended, taking Robyn's hand to steady himself as he hit the floor. "You see, there was a report that crossed my desk about one of our skirmishes with the Capellans that included a BattleROM that identified a Capellan MadCat in their forces. Although this one apparently mounted an Orion arm, and had less missiles than the GDI one."

Robyn and Quintus shared a gaze of dread. Now the damned Liao's were doing better than them, even if it was a FrankenMech, and not a proper BattleMech?

"So, you can understand my concerns, as well as those of the Archon. We cannot allow the Federated Commonwealth to fall behind. So, what do you need?" Lord Davion's voice was hard and sharp, the desire to win

quite palpable.

* * *

Behind him, Hanse left the two engineers debating the merits of adding various arms or legs to other Mechs, trying to find the 'sweet spot' of what worked well together. He walked away from the hanger, rubbing his hands after cleaning some last streaks of grease off them. It was an interesting conversation he had once the two teachers had loosened up a bit. So far, the Sun Cat was ahead of the projected development schedule, which due to the inevitable complications, would push it back towards the initial design end-date. There were some trusted members of industry looking forward to adapting the prototype to mass production. Perhaps a new lance every year by the more optimal projections.

Well, it was a graduating project, so they would be done one way or another.

He didn't feel bad with exaggerating the existence of a second Mad Cat. It had been in a partial state of assembly when his people had found it, and the reports of a 'new' Mech in development had been expedited to his desk, by which time people in Intelligence had made the connection with the Coalition Mech. That they were desperate enough to even try was, he was undecided, either a sign of a very intelligent commander who knew a good theory when he saw one and wanted to experiment, or that of a dumb Liao (a redundant statement if there ever was one) who simply wanted the same toys as someone else did.

No, what actually concerned him was the presence of Free Worlds and Combine technology, a possible sign that the Concord was a bit more stable than his and the Archon's people had thought. Perhaps the threat of the united Federated Commonwealth was in their minds bigger than it actually was. Not a good sign, that.

However, on a more positive note, he already knew that NAIS had accepted the new alliance with a gusto, greatly desiring access to the heavy industry the Steiner family held. Well, he did too, but for slightly different reasons. Maybe he should invite young Melissa to attend NAIS. Assuming that the Archon would approve, of course.

Confident in his people, Lord Davion left NAIS, other things on his mind.

***College of Military Science, New Avalon Institute of Science
New Avalon, Federated Commonwealth
27 April 3023***

The Sun Cat emerged from the Gauntlet, armor scorched and broken off, one of the LRM launchers with a vicious slash across it from an Autocannon hit. But it emerged under its own power, having bested all comers in the testing grounds. Celebrations from the Engineering class, and from the fellow cadets of the MechWarrior who piloted the prototype Mech on its first live-fire exercise. So far, it was all a success.

***Achernar BattleMechs Headquarters, Ith
New Avalon, Federated Suns
14 December 2023***

Countess Rodina Achernar, head of the business that gave her her name, reviewed one last time the production proposal for the new Rakshasa class BattleMech. Their primary competitor for this bid was Corean Enterprises, who sought to expand their production lines past the Valkyrie. But their inability to produce anything heavier inside the Federated Suns was proving to be an obstacle that they would not be able to overcome.

Their other major competitors were from General Motors, and their own BattleMech production lines. But even the most helpful of projections assured the Countess that the GM would be unwilling to sacrifice their production of the tested Marauder to meet the new design. And given that both designs were the same tonnage, there was already a betting pool for how the first Marauder v Rakshasa battle would turn out. Given that one was produced by her company, she had placed her unofficial bet on the Rakshasa, trusting in ComStar to pay out her future winnings in a timely manner.

Achernar already had experience in the basic design schema of the arms, as well as incorporating the over-the-shoulder missile launchers with their historical and current designs of the Battleaxe, Hammerhands, and Warhammer. With that lineage, in addition to the troubles the other companies would have, she was sure that Lord Davion would approve of

her and her company.

Hah! Let Defiance and Irian try all they want, she knew her company could produce the new Mech far better than they could, as well as doing so wholly within the borders of the FedCom.

In fact, her people had promised delivery of a Lance in the next 14 months. Of course, in order to make sure her people knew what they were doing, they would have to conduct some... tests to make sure that the new design had all the kinks worked out of it. It was only good business, of course.

***Irian BattleMechs Unlimited Manufacturing Center
Shiro III, Free Worlds League
17 January 3024***

In the aftermath of the burning of Irian's "research" facility, several things were presented to the Board of Directors.

First was that despite circumstantial evidence, there was no certain proof that Achernar had anything to do with the sabotage. Yes, there was some evidence from recorded images, but it wasn't a proper match.

Second was that the FWL was quite annoyed with the loss. Many millions of C-Bills had been sunk into the 'development' of their answer to the FedSun's Rakshasa, and now it was all up in smoke. Literally. At this point, the leadership of the nation were pondering aborting any further funding, and simply going with the old standbys.

Thirdly: Don't store certain volatiles used in Mech development so close to actual construction facilities. Fortunately the people responsible for that mistake had the good sense to get immolated on site.

***titleofspaceport, New Avalon
Federated Suns
date tbd, 3025***

"Sortek!" Ardan, head of the personal Battlemech guard for Hanse Davion, or rather he soon would not be, turned from where he was overseeing the loading of the 1st Davion Guard onto the Dropships that would take them

to the waiting front against the Capellan incursion into his beloved nation.

Behind him was a man he didn't like. The idea of spies like him just irritated the Mechwarrior, and yet Quintus Allard stood there, one hand clasped behind him, another holding onto a small case. Ardan politely smiled, wondering what the head of Intelligence was doing here, now. The smile was returned. "What can I do for you, Allard?"

"I was hoping to catch you before you left, and I am glad to see you." Quintus offered his free hand and Ardan shook it. "I was wondering if I could get a couple minutes of your time before you left?"

Ardan expressed his confusion. "What is it? You aren't the kind of man to come all the way out here to talk to people. And I know you don't approve of me. I'm quite sure you were delighted at my decision to transfer."

Quintus nodded. "That is true. However, my duties to Hanse require that I set aside my personal feelings for a while to ask a favor of you."

"Me?" Ardan switched from confusion to surprise. "Surely you have a thousand people you command..."

"Ah yes, but none of them strike that careful balance of people that are going to Stein's Foley and whose judgment that both Hanse and I trust in certain things." Allard gestured with his free hand to emphasize the point.

"Then make yourself quick, I've got a Dropship to catch." Ardan glanced back at the field where his Victor was being loaded carefully onto the ship in question. He wished he was down there right now, but had higher priorities at the moment.

"Very well. I have come into possession of intelligence regarding the attack on Stein's Foley." this caught Ardan's attention as he knew full well that knowing what the enemy wanted meant the ability to counter those plans, to lay ambushes and destroy their supplies. "However, the ... source of this information is not someone that I yet trust." He held the case in his hand in front of him, offering it to the Mechwarrior. "In here is some of the information I've received that I feel would be of use to a military man such as yourself."

Ardan took the case, noting that it wasn't too heavy. Probably had papers in it. "What do you want me to do?"

"I trust you to do what you would normally do. However, after you land, start opening the envelopes and compare what is in them to what has actually happened. I would like for you to note what is accurate and what is not, and then once it is safe for you to do so, simply tell me how good my source is."

"Why not get one of your spies to do this?"

"As I said, it's a matter of trust, MechWarrior. And, yes, I will tell you that there are others with different cases. This is just the one I'm giving to you. You can say no. I'll accept that, but if this source is correct, then there is much more where it came from that spells dire news for Hanse and the entirety of our nation." Quintus shrugged as he spoke. "I don't have any expectations, but honestly, I'm hoping that you'll look at this information and it will make you laugh at the wrongness of it all."

Ardan's curiosity was peaked. He looked at the case in his hands, then back at Hanse's spymaster. "Fine, I'll take it. Open it after we land, right?"

Quintus nodded, and then left, leaving the MechWarrior to his thoughts and curiosity.

***Wilderness, Stein's Foley
Federated Suns
date tbd, 3025***

Ardan leaned back in his Victor's cockpit, breathing deeply to try and control his breathing. It had been an extraordinarily stressful descent. The Duke was screaming as the modified plan unfolded around him, the defending areospace fighters moving to try and catch the Dropships when they moved away from their initial flight plan, the fight thereafter which he could not participate in due to being in his Mech at the time.

The final straw was the jump from the Dropship. His jumpjets pushing their limits to make sure he didn't wind up as a flat... He had seen what happens when combat drops fail. He didn't want that at all.

With his mech shut down, and cooled to the local temperatures, he was all but invisible to any searchers. He unbuckled himself, and opened up his cooling vest, making his way around the cramped cockpit to the little storage space in the back.

Opening it, he held in his hands the case he had held onto for weeks, that mysterious case that had tugged at his mind all the while just as he tugged it around with him. The case was unlocked, and he did resist the temptation to open something early.

But now that he was on the ground, albeit not where he wanted to be, he could open the case with the intelligence in it. He really wanted to rub such an unpredictable event into the face of Quintus' supposed superiority.

With a click, the case opened, and he looked inside to find a half-dozen envelopes tied closed. The one on top was labeled Open after landing. Taking it, he returned to his comfortable control couch and opened the envelope, letting the papers slide out onto his lap. At least they weren't all loose, instead glued together in the upper corner.

Setting aside the now-empty envelope, he began to read the contents.

Reading a clinical description of how the flightplan was argued, and the reasons for the change send a hard twisted chill through the gut of the Mechwarrior. Worse than the time he faced an Atlas with only a half-ton of ammo left for his Autocannon.

This intel source was good enough to know about changing plans before they happened. Oh, sure, they got some of the details wrong. The Landing zone was different, but the reasons for the presented zone were logical, and he could see why it could be picked.

If someone could predict this... what was Allard doing, and who was he courting?

He looked down to the other unopened envelopes, dreading that they would be just as accurate.

* * *

"This is Gold Leader. Calling all points. Rally to my position." Ardan looked over the Marsh that surrounded him. If his jumpjets hadn't worked properly, then he would have had to have made a hard landing there to avoid being pulverized instantly by the impact with the ground. A good thing too, because that marsh didn't look like it would agree with his Mech.

"Gold Leader to anyone. Please respond." Damn. He was sure he had seen others come down near here. The Exeter was a good ship, and...

"Green Three to Gold Leader. Good to hear you voice sir. I think I got turned around." The voice in the radio halted Ardan's introspection.

"Green Three, this is Gold Leader. Home in on my signal. Who are you with?"

"17th Avalon Hussar's sir. Company A, the Marauders. Not that kind though. I'm Donald Fitzgerald. And you, sir?" Ardan nodded, recognizing the deployment. They had gotten in a bit of a mixup before leaving their home deployment, and dropped with Mechs that were normally out of their normal deployment patterns. He hoped it wouldn't be a problem in the long run.

"Ardan Sortek. I'm with the...."

** * **

An unfamiliar shape emerged from the primordial trees that were encamped in the marsh. "That you in the Victor, Gold Leader?" Donald's voice came over the radio.

"That I am, Green Three. Is that a...?"

"Yep, it's one of those new Rakshasa's being build by Achernar. Ain't she a beauty? Still has the new paint smell as well."

The older Mechwarrior gave the other Mech an appraising look, for this was the first time he had seen the production model. "75 tones, 90 meter Jumpjets, mid range lasers, an plenty of long range firepower."

"Yes sir! Brand new, and a definite improvement over my old Crusader. And no, you can't have it." There was a smile in the voice, and Ardan laughed in response.

"Come on then, MechWarrior Fitzgerald. We should be heading southeast. We'll pick up other stragglers along the way, and set up a good rally position."

** * **

Along the way, the two Mechwarriors chatted over tight beam comms about how their respective Mechs handled. Fitzgerald had more to say about his new Mech, gushing over all the new features, and how he was going to personally destroy every last Capellan from here to Sian. Ardan liked his wingman's exuberance, remembering when he too had that same passion. Of course, he had to add in that his Victor's heavy Autocannon had a recently installed step-down mechanism, allowing the massive weapon to conserve ammo in a prolonged firefight.

Eventually, they began to pick up errant radio traffic, the call-signs of a battle being fought. Donald recognized the voices, and pushed his heavy Mech as fast as it could go, using the Jumpjets to cut across terrain he would normally bypass. Ardan hurried after him, the two Mechs topping out at the same speeds. Ripping out of the marsh, they charged over a ridge, all semblance of stealth thrown away as they emerged into a killing field.

Apparently the Liao's had set up a camp here, to base their forces to try and bottle up the attacking Davions should they have landed on the Peninsula like the original plan had. Instead, the combat drop had placed a great deal of the attacking forces right on top of the Liao base, a fit of irony that Ardan would only consider after the battle.

Ardan heard Green Three fall into a flanking position behind him, slowing down to a walk while the Mechwarrior picked which target to best engage with his long-ranged weapons. With his shorter ranged guns, Ardan kept running, also trying to pick out a target when the decision was made for him.

A Thunderbolt emerged from a previously invisible dip in the ground, and

Ardan reflexively shot his Victor out of the way of the Large Laser as the Capellan Warrior tried his best to line up the weapon and Adran's head. At this range, the over-gunned Mech would have to work quickly, or get lucky to take out Ardan before it suffered severe heat problems.

The Liao pilot responded to the dodge by firing off the missile racks on the right shoulder. 15 missiles raced towards the Victor just as Ardan toggled his Autocannon to the half-fire rate, tracing a line of damage that etched across the left arm of the Thunderbolt. Ardan pushed his mech faster, trying to get close to the enemy where his missiles would be less effective and his Autocannon would be telling.

Missiles exploded along legs of his own Mech, denting his own armor badly there just as a paired salvo of missiles rushed past him, matched by the telltale flashes of heavy Laser fire. The weapons struck true, and the forward armor across the Thunderbolt's torso was ripped to shreds, although noting internal was hit.

"I got him, Gold Leader, I got him!"

Ardan had forgotten about the Rakshasa behind him. The lumbering Mech had hung back a little, staying a bit higher to allow Fitzgerald to keep a good vantage point while Ardan occupied the enemy. The Thunderbolt seemed confused, trying to decide which was the bigger threat, taking evasive maneuvers that threw off Ardan's attempt to hit something critical with his own lasers and missiles. "Steady Donald! Hang back and keep raking him! I'll close!"

The Thunderbolt, more familiar with the local ground, dashed into another depression, Ardan loosing sight of it. His mental tally on his foe led him to believe that it was to give the Mech time to cool off, which he didn't want to give the Capellan.

Toggling his thermal imagery, Ardan barely had time to locate the heat plume some 50 meters away from where the enemy had vanished before the Mech, heat sinks apparently cycled, jumped back into the fray. Lasers lashed out, Donald missing at his range while Ardan and his enemy both scored true. A flash of heat across the cockpit, and damage reports indicated that his left torso had taken a solid hit, while his own lasers had ripped loose the Thunderbolt's right arm, leaving it's heavy laser useless.

For a moment there, he thought he saw an ammo-bin in the right torso behind the armor, but it was gone in a flash.

"Behind you!" Donald's voice came as Ardan's radar reported that the Heavy Mech supporting him had fired its missiles at something behind him. It was barely enough warning as he triggered his jumpjets, but still, something hit him from behind.

Spinning the Victor on its jets, he saw the Warhammer that had managed to sneak up on him. Only a few of the missiles had hit the machine, and for a moment, he thought that his friend Sep was at the controls. The hard jar of landing shook him from his looking for the personal emblem of his comrade, and his gaze now lingered on the double-PPCs that were cooling down after missing the jumping Assault Mech. A medium laser fired, missing him by scant centimeters, and Ardan put his Victor into motion to make it as hard as possible to hit him.

A full shot from his own Autocannon missed the Warhammer as he heard Donald split his fire. Lasers on the crippled Thunderbolt, which was trying to engage him with its own LRM pack, and missiles on the Warhammer.

It was a bloody free-for-all as the Warhammer swung around to fire its PPCs at the Rakshasa, probably in some way trying to distract the 75 ton Mech from finishing off the smaller Thunderbolt. Ardan contributed by firing both of his lasers into the Warhammer, etching damage into armor. A lucky missile strike caused one of the PPCs to falter, and Ardan hoped that it was out of service.

Swiveling on its torso, Ardan was caught off guard when the Warhammer spewed liquid flame at him, a touch of cold fear telling him that this Mech was a -6L, not the -6R like he was expecting, a Liao configuration that was now causing his automated heat warnings to start up.

He jumped, not firing his lasers as he hoped that at such a close range, the Warhammer would expect him to back away from the infernal weapons. In his ear, he heard Donald announce that the Thunderbolt pilot had ejected, glad that one enemy was down. But like that fallen foe, the Rakshasa also had heat problems in a prolonged fight, and so the younger Mechwarrior held his fire to allow the overworked heatsinks to do their job.

It didn't matter to Ardan, who had barely gone straight up. The Warhammer had advanced, hoping to keep the Victor in its sights as the PPCs cycled, but Ardan's heart leapt when he realized that the enemy was right under him. He kicked in the maneuvering thrusters once, let the massive machine ride against its shrieking gyros. The WarHammer turned, looking up, its PPC rising too late...

The impact was deafening. Metal shrieked, and the WarHammer's cockpit opened like a flower between the Victor's feet. In combat, the Victor was a constant surprise to Mech Warriors encountering it for the first time, for none expected a 'Mech of its size to be jump-capable, and Ardan's style of combat used the jump-jets heavily to exploit this preconception.

Smashed to the ground, the flamer's ammo ignited, causing the Victor heat warnings to shriek even louder. Ardan thumbed the cut-off switch, and backed away before any more surprises came out of his destroyed foe.

Seeing Donald and his Rakshasa descend towards him, Ardan began to help clean up the battlefield.

***Private Office, Quintus Allard
New Avalon, Federated Suns
date tbd, 3025***

He looked over the report sent in from Stein's Folly. The recapture was successful, and he barely glanced over the battle reports in favour of a single report from Ardan. It was 10 words, followed by a single sentence. Yes. Yes. no. No. Yes. No. Four. Yes. No. No. You scare me.

Allard couldn't suppress the shudder. 8/10 points of commonality on incidents that occurred, the only two being very specific details. It was an impossible level of accuracy, and that meant only one thing.

Hanse Davion was under attack by ComStar. And now he knew how.

New Dallas Militia HQ
Township of Al'Isard
04 July 3024

The fireworks marked an ancient celebration, one whose history had long been forgotten to the inhabitants of New Dallas. Their new neighbours from Motherlode, Third Earth, had told them that the date celebrated the birth of a powerful nation on the homeworld of Humanity. They had suggested that perhaps it was also a celebration of the founding of their colony as well.

Or perhaps, the Dallasites conferred privately, they didn't need a reason to celebrate at all. Celebration for celebrations sake.

On this particular day though, another shipment had arrived from Outside. Another couple BattleMechs to be put back into service, more agricultural equipment (which was far more useful), and the usual sundry items.

Some military equipment was tasked with joining the ever-growing defence force. Reports from the sons and daughters of New Dallas that went Outside showed the truth of what their neighbours had told them; it was wild out there. Sure, there was peace in places, but Outside was still dangerous in its own right, just like the wilds were at home.

On this day, the former SLDF headquarters was being officially repurposed to provide a central location to coordinate the militia forces under the command of the newly promoted General Jefferson, former Boss. A convention of Bosses from around continent had formed up last year to discuss their official policy when dealing with Outside, and their neighbours. Tycho Jefferson put up a good front about how he and his men already had a good deal going, and the rest of the Bosses agreed, and then took away his job to make him a military man.

Boss Nelson, a righteous bastard in Jefferson's opinion, had taken the reigns as President for the first year, a position and time frame that their neighbours had suggested as a way to keep power stable while

they sorted things out. Of course, in becoming the Boss of New Dallas, he had lost his job as Boss of Al'Pelleon, which was a good enough trade in Jefferson's mind.

Yep, today was a grand day, and Old Capital would be a grand place, once it got rebuilt.

Interim Spaceport, Old Capital New Dallas 09 July 3024

Colonel Wayne looked over the dozen fresh-faced recruits. Behind them was the thirty or so volunteers from Earth, people who had agreed to take the two-year tour of duty on New Dallas and Helm to help rebuild one, and salvage the other.

But it was the locals that were the problem. They had passed what the local city-states had decided would do for the training of a planetary militia; the GDI officer felt that they might pass muster as an Eagle Scout troop in both age and capacity, never mind the requirements of a proper military outfit.

"Hello Men. And Lady." He added the last as a nod to the freckled woman in the front row, a Dallasite with a grin far too big to fit on her face. "You've all asked to come Outside with us on our trip to Helm. On our way there, we're going to drop off some grain and farm equipment that some folks have ordered from our folks on Helm. It won't be a straight trip, we're going to spend about a month cooped up in this tin-can behind me and the JumpShip waiting upstairs. There won't be much to see though, because we'll be just dropping stuff off and leaving.

"But that'll also mean no messages to your ma or pa or sweetheart. Sad to say, but with your HPG broken in the Rain of Fire, the letters you write will have to wait a couple months for us to bring them back." It was annoying, but the reasonable conclusion to that search. Before ComStar had their ability to enforce the sanctity of the HPG system and the Ares Conventions, New Dallas' own comm station had been blown away from orbit. At least twice if the debris was any

indication.

Moving on with his speech, he turned on his heel to pace back down the line. "So, given that we touch off tomorrow, I'd strongly suggest that you all make your goodbyes, and be back here at 0600. Anyone who's already done those things can stay and help us with the loading. Dismissed!"

Only two stayed with the GDI DropShip, whom were both set to the task of first making sure their personal gear was stored, then helping to reload the deliveries the ship would have to make on their way back to Helm. The John Deere cover business was improving steadily as word of mouth showed that their products were dependable and cheap, which was a marked improvement over what was previously available. There was some talk of finding a factory closer to the Capellan / Davion border to purchase and refurbish, but that was something the civilians would deal with, not the agents.

But once on Helm, the dozen recruits would rotate with the dozen already there, who would help smuggle a piece of technology or two out of the Cache and back to New Dallas, awaiting the dedicated trip back to Antallos and Earth. So far they had made a single trip, delivering three Star League Royal Mechs, as well as a copy of the Helm Library Core. Another trip was due near the end of the year.

Slow and Steady, they would win this race.

Office of the Vice-President in charge of External Independent Relations, Irian Technologies
Irian, Free Worlds League
16 July 3024

Vice-President Mirelle Jakart read a report that barely registered before stamping her approval onto it, sending it on its way to its proper recipients. Her lavish corporate title was a corporate-speak description of her real title and duties for Irian Technologies. Officially, she was to introduce to smaller companies the benefits of working with or allowing investiture by Irian, a public relations position designed to enhance the corporate image and encourage

these smaller, single-planet businesses to see the greater picture.

It was a simple job, really. Irian had a reputation that preceded it, and she had encountered not a few companies that existed for the sole purpose of being bought out by the larger megacorporation. It was only when someone really screwed up that bad things happened, the gears having long since been greased. Unless, of course, she was like her predecessor, who screwed up a major acquisition in the Capellan Confederation, and was given a 9mm retirement package for his trouble. But that was years ago, nothing off her nose for it.

The next folder in her inbox was a thin thing, and she flipped it open, expecting a quick decision before moving on to the next item. It was a report from Accounting on a recent company startup on the world of Helm, an AgroMech Factory that wasn't really producing AgroMechs, but specialized groud cars. The document showed projected profits for the company, and noted that it would be a good acquisition. What caught her eye, however, was the company's age. The factory was two years old, when normally Irian wouldn't consider anyone under the age of five. Historically, Irian had made acquisitions prematurely, and wound up footing the bill when they turned out to be duds. Age was an indicator of viability; that a company could operate independently and remain profitable made them worthy of Irian's attention.

Curious. Accounting had run the numbers on the factory, and, while it was making a tidy profit, the startup funds seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. No record of any loans, from ComStar or any local benefactor; nothing. Not even the current proprietor of the company and factory was listed in any prior records.

It was quite worrying, that. She made a quick call to Legal, and found that yes, they were conducting their own investigation at this time, thanks for her attention, and they would send the paperwork up when it was ready.

Turning back to the files at hand, she saw that there was a report from Research about their products. It was an interesting paradigm that this John Deere was using. They rejected ArgoMechs as much as possible, instead focusing almost exclusively on specialized

groundcars. Research indicated that these products were incredibly fragile, and had a normal lifespan of no more than 50 years before literally falling apart. The only good thing was their internal combustion engines, which produced far more power than normal, at the cost of near-constant maintenance. It was a travesty of poor planning, they offered in their report; one that showed massive cost-cutting measures in order to gain short-term profits.

Mirelle wanted to pick up her phone, and give instructions regarding this upstart company, but held back. There was something here that she couldn't put her hand on, and decided instead to wait for Legal to submit their reports before committing to any action. At the very least though, this John Deere needed to be shown how business was done in the Free Worlds League, wholly owned subsidiary of Irian Technologies.

Robert Marsden Memorial Spaceport Tharkad, Lyran Commonwealth 08 August 3024

Katrina Steiner, Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth, and most powerful woman in the Inner Sphere (given that all the other Successor State Lords were men), strode down the back hallway of the Spaceport annex with an expression of anger and annoyance.

Two guards flanked a nondescript door, straightening to inhuman stiffness as she spun on one foot and smashed through the door, ready to unleash the full fury of the Steiner family on the startled person sitting there.

"Mother!" Melissa Steiner mastered her expression, shifting it to one of pureness and honesty. A desperate measure to defuse her mother before she did something they would both regret. She was too big for a spanking. Right? "Are you here to see me off?"

"MELISSA STEINER!" As the door closed behind the older woman, the younger saw the two guards begin to move away from the door. They didn't need or want to hear this. "What the hell were you thinking?" The yell was reduced to an angry hiss, and Melissa wasn't sure which

would be more effective in scaring her.

Instead she put on the best nonchalant expression. "I was thinking of going to Solaris, Mother."

Katrina fumed. When did her daughter become so wilful? Was it the influence of her friends? No, they were checked, double checked and rechecked. Her teachers? Well, they could be changed. Her father? No.... Not that. "And what, exactly, were you planning on doing there?"

"I was going to see the games, Mother."

The Archon was flabbergasted. "And you... What?!?" She had no clue who to punish for this. Melissa was an obvious target, but there had to be more than that.

"There's a difference between watching some HoloVid or BattleRom, and actually being there. And if I'm going to be Archon, wouldn't it be better for me to see BattleMechs in action before I go to the battlefield?" What went unsaid was Melissa's inability to pilot a BattleMech properly in any way shape or form.

"You want to gallivant all the way to Solaris, just to watch THE GAMES? You are Archon-Designate! You have responsibilities!"

"It's not like I'm going to be away for months, mother. Just a couple weeks there, a week or two enjoying myself, then a couple weeks back! And I can study in the meantime!"

The Archon glared. "No. If you truly want experience on the battlefield, I can arrange for you to be an observer on an anti-piracy patrol along the Rim."

"NO! You can't, Mother. Anything you *arrange*," the word was thrown out with disgust, "will be just like everything else. As safe, as boring, and as stupid as sitting in a SimPod all day. You learn nothing. *I* learn nothing." Melissa stood up to try and stare at her mother, but her intense gaze was sabotaged by the fact that she was still shorter than her mother.

The Archon knew better than to dispose of all her emotions from the get-go, and summoned forth the indignation that came from a Mother Knowing Best. "You will not! There are safer places for you to be!"

"It's Solaris VII, Mother! I'm not stupid! It's not like I'm running off to New Avalon, or joining up with the Foreign Legion!"

"Yes, It's Solaris! Right next to the Free Worlds League! I can't risk having you there!"

"The 32nd RCT is there, Mother, and the 10th Skye Rangers! I checked! And it's not like anyone is going to attack Solaris of all places!"

Going to New Avalon was an option, Katrina mused, but doing so before she and Hanse had formalized their deals didn't feel right. There were still a lot of details to iron out, and the Concord of Kapteyn only put more pressure on them to do it right.

And the thought of her daughter sneaking across the Draconis Combine to join the GDI's 'Mech Legion was something that was laughable in its arrogance. Even if she could outrun an HPG message, her daughter wasn't a MechWarrior, and would be washed out of the training process.

"The 32nd is still rebuilding, you know that." The Archon sighed. "You will come home, Melissa, and we will discuss this when we are both less emotional."

She turned and left the small room, leaving the younger daughter to the silence.

Minutes passed, and the door opened again. In walked her primary bodyguard, Cheryl Schmitt. Melissa was certain it was an alias, but she had no problems with that. Cheryl tossed a package at her, which was caught and opened. "Plan A is still go?" She would have to thank her cousin Ryan for his help too.

Cheryl nodded. Melissa volunteered to act as a distraction while she

went and did the actual work of getting the Archon-Select offworld. What Melissa wasn't told was that the entire plan had been vetted by the Archon's staff, and even the Archon herself, who had played her role to perfection. In some ways, moving Melissa from Tharkad to Solaris was being used as a test of internal security.

Melissa thought she was tricking her mother with the help of her people, but Katrina Steiner was Archon for a reason.

Irian Technology, Stewart HQ
Stewart, Duchy of Stewart, Free Worlds League
11 August 3024

Mirelle was worried. She had been summoned to a meeting of the Senior Partners back on Irian; even the Duke himself was in attendance. They had called her, not to task, but to grill her thoroughly on the existence of this John Deere start-up business. That such a small thing had come to their attention like this scared Jakart, and she was afraid she would be losing her job very shortly.

But they weren't going to do that. Legal had apparently filed their report over her head, with the Partners directly, and that had caused them to summon her to brief her directly.

The short of it was that John Deere didn't exist.

It had popped up out of nowhere on Helm, ripped the previous owner out of his seat with hardly any grace, and snatched up the factory for themselves. There was no history to the owner or the company, save scant mention of such a thing having been destroyed on Terra when it was scourged by Amaris. They had appeared practically in Irian's backyard with no whisper of a trace, and started doing something out of the ordinary.

And that scared the Senior Partners. Oh, they wouldn't admit to it, but she could tell. And what scared them, terrified her. They had ordered her to go to Helm and investigate personally. Finances were not a concern, and she could pick who she wanted on her team, within reason.

He job was to find out what these people were really after, and then report back. If this was just a huge overreaction, fine. They could handle being safe rather than sorry. But if this was the prelude to a threat to Irian, she would be given a *carte blanche* to wipe it out.

So she went to the Stewart Office first. They had sent a HPG message ahead, and had set things in order. Now she just had to wait a couple weeks for the rest of her team to arrive. The Senior Partners didn't care about her personal agenda or those of her team, she explained in the summons. They had been given a job, and they were going to do it.

While waiting for her team's arrival, she sent the standard corporate letter to John Deere, informing them of certain investment opportunities available through Irian. It was to test the waters, and to see how they would react to the veiled demand for a bribe to keep their business.

**Office of the CEO, John Deere Agromech and Tractor Factory
Helm, Free Worlds League
12 August 3024**

"What do you really want?" Daniel asked of no one in particular. He looked over the massive legal missive that had been delivered by a ComStar courier – a quick question revealed that it was a delivery option, but one that was quite expensive. Having twice read it over, he was preparing for a third read after sending a message to the Cache that he wanted to talk it over with The Samurai due to possible complications.

In one hand, he held a pen that he tapped nervously against a legal pad covered in notes and references. There were various responses available to him, from simply caving and paying up to trying to activate a full lance of those Mechs in the Cache to act as a defense force. Although that particular plan, if appealing to his inner Corporate Warlord, ran into the problem of lack of reliable, loyal and trained Mech pilots. Even the New Dallas recruits were more at home with the various vehicles than BattleMechs.

A buzzer sounded from the intercom panel set into his desk like it was straight out of the 1950's. He pressed the button to connect him to his secretary, one Ms Sheffield, who had kept her job through the change in ownership simply by being competent.

"Sir, Mr David is here to see you." Daniel blinked in surprise. That was a quick response. Perhaps the man had been in town already instead of out at the Cache.

"Send him in please. And could you please inform my next appointment that something serious has come up and I may have to bump them back?"

"Of course, sir." The comm closed off, and the Samurai casually let himself into the office, closing the door behind him. David hung his jacket and hat up as he passed the hatrack in a single smooth motion before taking a seat.

"So, what's the problem? It can't be too serious if you didn't use the emergency system."

"Irian Technologies." Daniel gathered his thoughts as he handed the notice to the leader of Tomb Raider to read. "They're a megacorporation, one of the larger ones – multiple planets. They're giving us an ultimatum."

"Ultimatum? Those usually come at the end, after negotiations. Who are they, and what do they want, exactly?" David Morris took a seat and noted that the white-noise generator they had been supplied wasn't on. Given that he had drilled its use into the civilian personally, he figured that it was a case of something that he didn't mind ComStar eavesdropping on, assuming they even got this close.

Daniel rolled his shoulders to try and get some stress out of it. "The Source Material we have says that they are based here in the League on a planet named Irian, and that they're a supplier to the local military. Not much beyond that, sorry to say. I've sent in a request with C-Star for more information, their public package and all that, and they promised to get back to me tomorrow." He sighed as he saw

that the GDI Intelligence agent's eyes had started to glaze over while trying to pierce the dense legalese. Daniel sympathized. "As for your other question, it looks to me like a simple shakedown. Apparently, they feel we've been stepping on their toes with reactivating the local factory and are asking for a cut due to whatever contract they had with the previous owners."

"That doesn't sound too bad." David lied through his teeth, the civilian giving him a look that said he didn't buy it either. "How much are they asking for?"

Daniel told him. "And honestly, I think we can pay it as well. Sure, it'll cut into the profit margins, but I'm sure you'll agree that's not why we're here. And once you get what you want, we can come up with a more long-term plan."

The Samurai smirked. "A businessman who thinks beyond the pocket book. How rare."

Daniel shrugged. "Oh, don't get me wrong. It's just that we're not exactly in a position to go challenging someone who probably has a budget for paint larger than the entire factory. I can't really see any means of fighting them that won't get us into deeper trouble."

David nodded. "Keep us appraised, will you?"

"Of course. Now I just have to go add an 'Irian Blackmail' line to the annual budget." A snort of humour accompanied that statement.

**Temporary Office of the Vice-President in charge of External
Independent Relations, Irian Technologies
Stewart, Free Worlds League
26 August 3024**

Vice-President Jakart was surprised when her secretary had informed her that the John Deere Factory had sent her a package. It was probably some sort of legal counter-offer, the necessary small-talk before they folded. It had happened before, and would happen again. Of course, given the paranoia of the Senior Partners, she couldn't take

any chances. So after clearing her desk, and directing a legal aide to take notes for her, she summoned the package.

A workman brought a box in, causing the Vice-President to furrow her brow in confusion. Dismissing the grunt worker, she cut open the box. If there was anything wrong with it, security would have caught it.

Inside was tightly-packed C-Bills; cold hard cash. And a note on top. Her hand shaking, realizing that her secretary signed for all this, acknowledging that she had officially received the package, she picked up the note that was signed with a vague scrawl and read it.

Dear Vice President Jakart;

On behalf of John Deere Corporation, I apologize for the unusual delivery. We do not yet have an automatic system to transfer funds between our two companies. Please find enclosed the requested amount, as well as a receipt for the payment. We look forward to doing business with you in the future, and think that we can give benefit to each other.

**Office of the CEO, John Deere ArgoMech and Tractor Factory
Helm, Free Worlds League
30 August 3024**

Daniel finished up his packing, looking about the office one more time. His trip to Solaris VII was on short notice, but the prospects of hawking his wares at a major interplanetary convention was too good to pass up. The Samurai had approved of his trip, or rather could not disapprove as this was purely business. He could, however, assign a couple his men to act as his guards and assistants.

Short notice, but he had already arranged for transportation with a grain shipment headed for the major world, as well as a selection of product. It was two jumps to Solaris, enough for the grain to not rot in transit. He felt apprehension at leaving his post, but it was something that a man in his position would do if they weren't sitting on the most important location in human space outside of NAIS or either Earth. He had to act the part.

And the part required that he go to the free planet of Solaris and try to gain profit.

**Temporary Office of the Vice President
Stewart, Free Worlds League
04 September 3024**

"They're gone?" Mirelle couldn't hold her surprise off her face. Her recruited legal assistant, Trey Miller, nodded, holding the missive sent via HPG. "The CEO has gone to Solaris to attend a conference and exposition about agricultural technology hosted by ComStar. We already have a presence there, so I've taken the liberty of asking them to keep an eye on John Deere."

Mirelle nodded. Trey knew when to take initiative and when not to. That's why she trusted him as much as she could trust anyone immediately below her. "Good. Make the arrangements for us to pay a surprise visit to Helm. Without their CEO, I want to see how they react when they are faced with... oh, we'll call ourselves *serious investors*."

**Arrivals Terminal, Silesia Spaceport
Lyran Quarter, Solaris VII, Lyran Commonwealth
17 September 3024**

James Stroud, head of the Skye Tigers stable, wondered once again why Lestrade was dragging him into these inane plots. How the hell had Lestrade gotten it into his head that *Mellisa Steiner* of all people was coming to Solaris? It was nearly inconceivable. The Archon-Designate wouldn't leave Tharkad outside of a Regiment of bodyguards.

Even Frederick Steiner disagreed with the idea, laughing it off, a disagreement between master and manipulated in the ongoing efforts to free Skye that had been quickly smoothed over.

Putting the discussions of politics out of his mind, he checked his

watch and the arrivals board. A distant cousin of Ryan had wanted to come to Solaris to watch the games live, and was apparently doing this under the board. It was silly and childish and there was no way that James would miss the chance to advertise his Stable to any child of Skye.

Joanna Barker was her name. The name was obviously an alias, as he knew of no Barkers in his sponsor's extended family. Restless, he moved from his plastic seat to lean against the wall that would allow him a good view of the portal he expected this Joanna to enter from. He had been given a photograph to know her by, one recently taken if he was any judge of pictures.

It wasn't long before the DropShip that he was waiting for to settle down, and the passengers to disembark. She was easy enough to pick out, even if her awestruck gazing at the might of Solaris was the same as half the people around her. James levered himself off the wall, ready to introduce himself when he paused. Something was off...

She looked vaguely familiar, but had auburn hair and blue eyes. But that wasn't what was setting off his internal alarms. Joanna Barker had three body guards. At least. And he wasn't even an expert in picking them out. One was obvious, another auburn haired woman who looked the part of Joanna's older sister. Another was a burly man who at a casual glance looked like any other man who did heavy grunt work around the planet. The third was a businessman who looked nervous and ready to bolt to the front of the line to get it all over with.

The Skye loyalist wondered just what sort of quagmire he had blundered into. And how much he could he gain from this? It was obvious that this Joanna was more important than was let on, but how important was she to the future of Free Skye?

But first, to make a disarming mistake, and greet the bodyguard like she was Joanna.

Skye Tigers Stables, Silesia
Solaris VII, Lyrn Commonwealth
19 September 3024

Melissa wanted to wail in pain as the mauled *Locust* was helped back into the stable's garage. The light 'Mech had been nearly ripped to shreds by the MCY-98 *Mercury* that it had faced, despite the equivalent weapons and armour deployed by the two 'Mechs in their duel.

She waited behind the technical crew, her 'sister' behind her. 'Joanna' had been invited to come behind the scenes by James, who had been nothing but a good host for her few days here on Solaris. He was quite the Skye loyalist, she had found, putting that region of the Lyrn Commonwealth ahead of all the other sections. She had nodded and agreed with him, pressing for details of the glorious history of Skye as was proper for her cover identity, complaining that she didn't have the whole truth from her standard education.

Which wasn't a complete lie; it was just that her education as Archon-Select left the details out in favour of the bigger picture. She couldn't know the personal history of every last world amongst the hundreds she would one day rule, and now she found that she had been missing out on many rich histories, and entertaining stories from all over the place.

When she got home, she was quite certain she would be confined to the Triangle for a while, so she figured she might as well spend more time in the library reading than she had before. She might get out by the time she was thirty.

But it would be well worth it.

* * *

Later in the day, she sat with the stablehands as they took their lunch break. Her self-study in electronics, when compared to the practical experience of the men and women around her, showed firsthand how much she didn't really know. But they were all very supportive of her, and she said her farewells gladly when Cheryl called her over.

Outside of the break room, her bodyguard produced two tickets from a pocket. "These are a gift from Mister Stroud. He got them from some of his business partners, and with too many, he asked me to see if you were interested."

She handed them over to Melissa, who looked them over. Her eyes raised, and she stuffed them into her own pocket. "Sure! That'll be fun!"

**Jerome Blake Convention Hall
International Zone, Solaris VII
20 September 3024**

Melissa and her bodyguard walked through the crowded hall, looking not completely out of place as the two women actually did ask intelligent questions, both of the machines themselves, and of the economics involved. The entire event was hosted by ComStar as an attempt to help the common people of the Sphere, and a great many companies were looking to make a positive impression on the controllers of Terra.

She stopped in front of a beautiful green groundcar that shimmered with a glossy paint job. The symbol of the company was a yellow stag inside a yellow square, which triggered an awareness that she should know this. The one groundcar was joined by a dozen others, ranging from ones small enough for a single man to ride openly to a monstrous vehicle as big as a small BattleMech.

John Deere... where had she heard that name before?

"Hello ladies, in the Agricultural industry?" Her introspection was shorted when a well trimmed man approached her, eyes and smile wide on his face. He had a jacket in the same colours as his merchandise, and the two ladies could see behind him that his fellows were doing some business.

"Not directly, but we're always on the lookout." Cheryl replied, shaking the offered hand. "We're with Skye. I'm Cheryl, this is

Joanna." Melissa nodded at the introduction, letting her guard take the lead while she cast glances at the machines behind.

"And I'm David. Well, what would you like to know?"

"You said AgroMechs? I see a lot of groundcars here."

David shook his head. "No, not 'Mechs directly. They're a fairly new addition to our lineup. We've focused on tractors and the like exclusively for a long while. Here, let me give you a tour before your sister here starts trying to take apart our display models." He smiled and pointed at the Steiner, who was inching closer and closer. At the attention, she smiled innocently.

* * *

Behind the curtains, Daniel relaxed a little bit. This was a good idea, this business trip. It got him out of the factory for a while, and he could see the appeal of taking a vacation on a different planet. It was like going to Australia, only farther away.

Bored he flipped open his DS, thankful for the entertainment value, despite the fact he had beaten pretty much everything already. Some games had replay value. He kept one ear out, listening for anything that would require his attention. He heard the Samurai ply his charms on some ladies, and was very thankful that a man that glib was on the same side as him.

* * *

Melissa asked to see the inner workings of one of their machines. It was a natural question, really. Their internal combustion engine was something else entirely! Able to produce massive amounts of horsepower from such a small device! Their host had nodded, then guided the two of them back behind the curtain to meet the man who was actually in charge, and Melissa noted that Cheryl only tensed slightly.

She had been on edge for the past few minutes, but Melissa couldn't figure out why. There were hundreds, if not thousands of people from

the Free Worlds League and the Lyran Commonwealth here, so maybe she saw someone she was worried about?

Never mind that. Something else had come up that was far more important than anything she could have gotten from an AgroCar factory.

The man she needed to ask permission from had the same game system she did.

"HEY!" Instantly all thoughts of politeness or stealth left her heads, a shout of attention grabbing that was only exaggerated by the completely unnecessary arm pointing. Cheryl's eyes bugged out while Daniel and David could only react in much the same manner.

Daniel, as the target of the accusation flipped his device shut and slid it into a pocket. "Yes? How can I help you?" The calm and level tone of voice was a contrast to the excited proclamation.

"YOU!" Melissa repeated, ignoring Cheryl's attempts to get her to reduce her voice to a level that wasn't attracting attention from the far side of the convention hall. "You!" She repeated as she strode up to the John Deere executive before pointing at his pocket. "Where did you get that?"

Confused, Daniel looked over to David who pantomimed flipping open the game system and playing with the stylus before giving his best 'This is just a guess' shrug. Daniel responded by putting in his best 'I'm in charge, and you just overstepped your bounds' face and stood up, straightening his suit to increase the effect. "And you, young lady, where are your manners?"

Instantly the accusations faded, and the two men watched the teenager transform from a young girl with more energy than sense into a person of power and charisma. It was a startling thing that took Cheryl by surprise, but training kicked in, and her bodyguard training went into high gear, instantly pegging the man behind them as a high-class threat.

"You have something that you shouldn't have, sir." Melissa said

calmly. "Those are very rare to come by, given that the only source has a self-imposed trade embargo on anything more advanced than pre-spaceflight equipment. That you have one means that either you have had contact with pirates, or other black market dealers, or you're from there."

"And what would 'those' and 'there' be, exactly?" Daniel kept the focus on him while David pressed his panic button, alerting the other members of the security and intelligence detail that something was going down.

"The Nintendo! From Motherlode!" Melissa produced her battered copy of the machine and waved it in the air. "PLEASE TELL ME YOU HAVE NEW GAMES!"

* * *

'Joanna' held onto her seat as Cheryl delivered a blistering lecture to the 14 year old about proper etiquette and behaviour for one of her station. Daniel watched with bemused attention while David called the all-clear, explaining the situation in terms that would generate a good deal of humour over the coming weeks.

Off to one side, Jack watched with casual interest as a couple men came up, were briefed then left with amused expressions. As part of the security of the 10th Skye Rangers on loan to the Skye Tigers Stables, he had been tapped to provide an extra set of eyes on the child-noble. It seemed like a reasonable assignment. Short term, and it wasn't like a kid could get into too much trouble on Solaris.

Now, if she were older, there would be plenty of trouble she could find, but thankfully that wasn't the case. Instead she had come to this fair to look at the products offered by the companies that couldn't break into the full BattleMech industry. Sad, really. But he couldn't go behind the curtains to where he could catch glimpses of a crimson faced Baker being dressed down by her older sister.

A couple of the plain-clothes security personnel walked by him, and he heard their laughing comments about how it was the stupid things that got past the radar, not the real problems.

Now, that twigged him and his curiosity. The way they spoke, it wasn't about anything he could normally place. Something was off here, and he had to trust his instincts. These people had thought something far more serious than two nobles with the same device having a chance meeting had happened. His curiosity was urging him to tail them and find out more, but that wasn't his job. Instead, he'd pass it up to the officers, and let them investigate the matter more.

But it wouldn't hurt to conjecture. John Deere was from Helm, in the League. Nothing out of the ordinary there. They shipped AgroMechs and the like around, which given the location and event was completely normal. So what were they worried about? Industrial sabotage? Couldn't be. Who in their right mind would target something like that? Now, if they were part of a company that made real equipment like DropShips or BattleMechs, he could believe it.

And yet they acted like they had something to hide. But what?

* * *

Melissa repeated her apology as Cheryl glared at her. Say what people would about her mother, Melissa had new respect for – and fear of – her bodyguard. She heard David congratulate her on her tirade, to which Cheryl responded that she was used to dealing with younger children when they got out of line, a response which earned a barking laugh.

Melissa didn't like being laughed at. It hurt. Instead, she turned her head up to the man with the other DS, both devices sitting on the table. "So, I'll tell you how I got mine, if you do the same, Joanna." Daniel made the peace offering simple for the young teenager.

She gestured at her copy. "My mother gave it to me. It was taken from Motherlode by the Pirate Raid those years ago, and she got it, thinking it was LosTech. When it wasn't, she gave it to me as a birthday present."

Daniel nodded. "Makes sense. Mine has a similar tale. My company bought some of the... loot from that raid, it's where we got some of

the ideas for the improved internal combustion engines. The surviving groundcars were given to the family of the president and this was my 'reward' for taking the job of expanding to Helm." It was nearly a total fabrication, and one he made up on the spot. Most important was the idea he implanted that Joanna was not the only one who had benefited from the Drakon Raid. "Now, as for your proper question, I'm afraid I don't have any other games with me. I left them in my room. And besides even if I loaned them to you, there's no guarantee that you don't already have your copies, nor can I say how long it would be before we meet again."

Melissa pouted. So close, yet so far! "Well, you're from Helm, right? I could always go there...." Her statement was cut off by a pained choke from Cheryl, who gave her a look of incredulity.

"You'll go there after the Lyrans conquer that world. Bad enough you sneaking this far away from home." The older woman crossed her arms to indicate that she wouldn't go that far in the plans of the young Steiner. "Maybe, if you asked nicely, you could borrow them, then mail them back when you are done. I'm sure ComStar has rates for light things like that."

Daniel pondered this. "Probably be more reliable than anything else. I don't suppose you know what games you have at the moment?"

Melissa recited the list from heart, causing the older man to take pause. "I'm beginning to think you should send an HPG message to Motherlode asking for the latest listing of available games. Although I think the shipping charges would be huge." He pocketed the written list. There were a couple there that he didn't have himself.

"I can even loan you some of mine! Fair trade!" Melissa spoke as though she had read his mind. "We can meet back tomorrow! Deal?" She offered her hand, and Daniel shook it, bemused by the enthusiasm.

"Tomorrow then."

Jerome Blake Convention Hall

International Zone, Solaris VII

21 September 3024

"You sure about this?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Daniel undid his tie, tossing it behind the curtain to give off a more casual air to his sales pitches. "It's just a local noble whose parents have some black-market connections, or just really wanted to spend a lot of money on their little girl. We can use this, in our own way."

David shook his head. "Like how?"

"Federation of Skye. After she came by, there were a few more enquiries from the local principality, and with Helm providing a good change of food for worlds less well off in the region, our presence can become synonymous with that world, bring both profiles higher. Meaning more profits, meaning less people asking who we are and why we're there."

The Samurai rolled his eyes. "Cuts both ways. Higher profile means more doors are open, but that also means more scrutiny. Our best work is done when no one is watching."

"Cuts both ways. Our best work can be done when everyone is watching." The civilian threw back, sharing a grin with the espionage agent. "Maybe we can have our cake and eat it too?"

* * *

Jack was back, this time with a ledger and a chequebook. He had talked with this superiors and they had agreed that an investigation was in order. They had lost the last trail of the usual smuggling routes into and out of Solaris, and this possible lead was something they would support. Enough to give him a budget at least, to observe how the money and material moved. He had a couple other guys in support, including one person already on the move to Helm to get a more direct look at this potential criminal vector.

It felt good to be able to actively pursue criminals to their nests,

rather than to wait for them to cross weapons with the 10th Rangers.

Oh, and here was the best distraction he'd get all day!

* * *

'Joanna' didn't feel comfortable in the dress she had been made to wear, but Cheryl was adamant that she needed to make a better impression this time than yesterday. Grumbling, Melissa agreed eventually, but did complain that it was tight in certain places. A quick look-over by her bodyguard revealed that yes, she was growing, and no, she couldn't ditch the clothes for something less formal.

She approached the pavilion in question, thankful that at least she got to carry a bag with her. And it was completely not a purse. A Bag. Not a Purse. And she would hit anyone over the head with it who thought otherwise.

A smile leaped onto her face as her newest best friend came out to greet her. It was all she could do not to demand to make the exchange here and now, but waited for the pleasantries to be finished with before getting to the deal at hand. That this was the same type of diplomacy her tutors had tried to teach her, just on a scale with something she had a vested interest in was a fact that went completely past her.

They made their way into the back, where they could chat in peace, her treasured gaming device safe in her bag, soon to be made better.

* * *

Jack watched Joanna distract the older gentleman in the ways that only an overly energetic teenager can. He may not be the best at this sort of thing, but even he recognized natural actions when they occurred, and muttered "Kids these days" in a tone of voice that the person across from him taking his money could only smirk and nod in agreement.

The best part about seeing a distraction? Being one too while

someone else did the dirty work.

Helmsdown Spaceport
Helm, Free Worlds League
21 September 3024

Mirelle glared helplessly as the latest in a long line of grain shipments trundled past her groundcar. The railroads had been constantly packed since her arrival yesterday, and casual queries from her team indicated that this happened every harvest season. This year was slightly better than average, so there was a lot of raw foodstuffs to collect from all over the planet to this single Starport where dozens upon dozens of DropShips awaited their turn to collect their cargo and deliver them to the worlds which couldn't fully support themselves.

It was a vital and necessary part of the interconnected economy of the Inner Sphere, each gear and cog working together in harmony to make sure everyone had everything they needed. And it was Irian's goal to be one of those vital mechanisms to set the pace of the Inner Sphere, to control the flow and distribution of all forms of wealth.

Ooooh, she liked that analogy, each world the axle of a cog that turns in connection with each other world. Irian and Terra being big ones naturally.

Trey was reading over a missive forwarded to them from Stewart. The Solaris AgroMech Convention was going as expected, with Defiance being their only real competition. The requested observations of their current target though had come through without much unnecessary commentary from her people on site, what did make it through bothered her slightly.

Her assistant was going over it himself to gather up his own opinions. And the first one out of his mouth was disbelief. "They can fit their entire production line onto a single *Union*? Preposterous. A proper manufacturing facility runs into the kilotons, well above the capacity of any single DropShip in their possession. I can see them building the individual parts here on Helm, then doing final assembly on site,

but what they claim is folly."

Mirelle nodded. She too had noted that, but something about the R&D report from Irian told her that this was not an exaggeration. "They're not building proper 'Mechs, Mister Miller. We have to remember that. This company has expressed disdain for that whole branch of technology and engineering, instead focusing on cheap, expendable ground vehicles to do the work."

Trey shook his head in opposition. "That may be, but there are certain requirements of any manufacturing facility that needs to be met. I agree that they can use the *Union's* fusion engine to provide the necessary power, but the storage of raw materials and the space requirements of a proper assembly line just don't fit. I still hold that their 'practical demonstration'" - a phrase he airquoted in the confines of the groundcar - "was a deception of some sort. The idea that they are encouraging local metalworkers, working in Iron of all things, to build their own replacement parts just goes against everything that centuries of modern economy has taught us."

This, Mirelle found herself agreeing with. The idea that a company would willingly cut into their profit margins like that was corporate suicide in her opinion. Why would a company try to destroy themselves like that, and under Irian's nose no less? There was something here she was missing, and she mulled it over hard.

They would arrive at the AgroMech factory in an hour or so, maybe she would get more clues then and there.

* * *

Front Lobby, John Deere AgroMech and Tractor Factory

Trey walked in before Mirelle, both to hold open the door for her as was polite, but also to get a good look around the lobby. He had no notions of what to expect, so he was unsurprised by what greeted him. The room shone with natural light, the tinted bay windows making it hard to see inside from the out, also allowed light from the overhead sun to play across the two story atrium in a well designed measure of aesthetics. He approved of the implication that they were

a professional company, all deep investigations to the contrary.

Jakart paused to adjust to the different lighting, before striding with purpose to the front desk, a curved fixture in the green that so dominated everything touched by John Deere. A pair of attractive secretaries were seated, headsets connected to jacks in the desk in front of them so they can direct incoming calls that reached their desk, or to pass messages along.

Mirelle knew how to handle people like them, and strode with purpose to the desk, pleased to note that the woman on the right raised her head to look at her come, meeting her gaze with a welcoming smile. "Hello!" she began, a chipper voice that overcame the apparent stress of the position, "welcome to the John Deere Factory! How may I help you?"

Trey produced their identification, recognized across the Inner Sphere by anyone of importance. Introducing himself and Jakart as representatives of Irian Technologies, and they were here to see the person currently in charge.

The secretary was far too cheerful as she made her reply. "Do you have an appointment?"

* * *

Mirelle hid her fuming well. Making appointments was for dealing with ones superiors, so as to not disturb them unduely when they could be dealing with something more important. The gall of these local hicks to have her wait while they *checked her credentials* made her want to leave this place, and call in a heavier duty response.

Although that would be a personal failing, and she couldn't have that. Instead, she forced herself to look at it from John Deere's perspective. A woman came up to them and demanded to see the person in charge (knowing full well the CEO was absent), introducing herself as belonging to the largest Megacorporation in the Inner Sphere (after some creative numbers against Defiance).

Of *course* they wouldn't believe her. If she was in their position, she

would check as well. She would have to. It just annoyed her to no end that she was on the receiving end of it, and that it had totally ruined her dramatic advances. It was so much easier to get what you want when the other party was off their feet than when they were prepared for you.

"Hello, my name is Alexander. This is Miss Longbottom." Mirelle cursed her self-reflection as she didn't notice the two representatives approach. Thankfully, Trey was on the ball, and used her inattention to tell them how put out that Irian was that their mutual investing was being treated.

Alexander introduced himself as the Chief Systems Officer, responsible for the technical upkeep of the Factory and subsidiaries, and Longbottom as the Company Secretary. Mirelle and her assistant gave the standard thanks for showing them around, essentially inviting themselves on a guided tour, which the locals had to accept.

It took less than 15 minutes from arrival to greeting, which was a mark in John Deere's favour, but showed that they were not put out at all by surprise visits by people as important as Jakart. In giving in to her request, they showed her around the general offices, making sure she didn't get a look at the actual paperwork being done before being escorted to the factory floor.

Given basic safety gear, Trey carefully took notes of the production process, and Mirelle was given the opportunity to test-drive a couple of their vehicles on the adjacent proving ground.

All it all it was certainly an interesting and educational tour, and the casual business discussions about product distribution (although she noted they were also into making sure the foodstuffs their products produced were also shipped with their resources – a nice start on a vertical monopoly) and resource acquisition intrigued her. They weren't interested at all in high-technology items, viewing the ArgoMechs with some disdain, if not outright as a necessary evil. Why they would do so when their own products, they freely admitted, were based in technology that predated spaceflight was beyond her.

However, with the information she had, she was willing to move to the next part of her investigation.

Precentor Theodore Bowden's Office, HPG Station Helm, Free Worlds League

"So what? You waste my time with this?" Precentor Theodore Bowden glared anger at the ROM Adept that was properly cowed before him. "What business is it of ours if some Mega-Corporation is doing their own business as long as it does not go against the desires of Our Most Holy Order?"

The ROM Adept regretted taking this posting. She thought that it would be an easy assignment on a Agricultural World, under a Precentor who was simply too well connected to be considered a threat but rather to be used as a mentor and sponsor. "Precentor Bowden, it is the will of Precentor Waterly..."

"I DON'T CARE!" Bowden cut her off hard. "I've seen her exaggerations for what they are, the delusions of a mind breaking under the pressure. She was too young, I told them, but no. The Primus wanted his little toy mistress rewarded. No, the woman clearly deserves the punishments and restrictions placed upon her, and that includes dropping these stupefying accusations against innocent people under our umbrella! There is ABSOLUTELY NO reason why we should send a priority dispatch to Terra about this, it will go out with the monthly reports as usual. Am I understood?"

DropShip Invisible Hand En Route to Helm, Free Worlds League

"Why the hell are we coming to this hole of a world? There's nothing here worth raiding!" Gregor Lionel, XO of the Pirate DropShip glared at his Captain, Soe Carlson. The threat was quite clear. Explain this decision, or be replaced.

"Yer'an idiot." Captain Carlson didn't bother to hide his annoyance. "You know what coming in without a flight plan or announcing

ourselves means. What we're here fo' is to get ourselves some cover for later raids against more valuable targets."

Gregor sneered. "Oh yeah? What in Kali's name are you talking about?"

The Captain sighed, knowing that the smarter members of the bridge crew would pass his wisdom along to the hands, depriving his XO of support in case of future... troubles. "Well, howabout we land politely and buy a fair bit of bulk grain. You know, if you had been paying attention to the ComStar NewsFeeds, you would know that Helm has had a bumper crop this year, so we buy a nice solid contract to deliver somewhere. We make the run, see what's at the other spot worth raiding, using the delivery to reconnoiter. Then, we'll come back later and hit them where the good stuff is, rather than just taking our chances on a smash-and-grab. You savvy?"

The XO backed down, though the twitching face told that he didn't want to. "Sure, sure." He didn't sound sincere, and the Captain decided that he would need a new XO sooner rather than later. Maybe an accident on the next raid?

Meeting Room, Star League Cache
Helm, Free Worlds League
22 September 3024

"So, Irian's not a threat?"

Alexander shook his head. "Not in the sense that we're worried about. They're looking for profits, not SLDF BattleMechs. So, until the Samurai gets back, I'm saying that we hold the fort and keep to the low profile that's been working good enough for us right now. If things change, we'll respond in kind. Dismissed."

Hotel Hyatt, Helmsdown
Helm, Free Worlds League

Her guards had swept the room again before she entered into her

personal meeting room. Trey was a couple steps behind her, arms full of paperwork, and a sour look on his face. With a relieved gasp, he dumped the pile onto the table, steadying it with one hand to prevent them from spilling all over the table.

Mirelle took a seat and swivelled to face the window. "What did you find?"

Trey took a moment to compose himself. "The Factory has paid all their taxes in full and on time. No attempts to create tax dodges, though if I may hazard a guess, it is most likely because they simply haven't had time to entrench themselves and gain favourable status." Mirelle nodded in agreement, and gestured for him to continue. "They also have no overt security forces. It looks to our people that they are more concerned with intelligence and sabotage than pirates or corporate raids."

"They would be fools not to, and JD are not fools." Mirelle commented as she pondered her next move. There were possibilities still running through her head, but she needed to know just how far this mysterious company would go to defend themselves. They had a maddening way of just smiling and accepting what came their way, nothing seemed to get under their skin at all. "Who do we have in Steward?"

"In terms of BattleMech forces? We have..."

Starport, Helmsdown

Soe took a deep breath of local air, thankful that it didn't have anything rank in it. He still remembered being tricked into breathing deep on a volcanic world in his youth, and to this day, he can still smell sulphur everywhere he went. Behind him, his pirates were doing legit cargo business, checking storage, and preparing to on load whatever they picked up. That they weren't doing it while under fire from the local defence forces did wonders for their morale and relaxation.

Gregor was still on the DropShip, refusing to leave until he felt

secure. The Captain had ordered the Chief Mechanic for his DropShip to not force him from there, but to also make sure he didn't do anything stupid. They weren't here to cause trouble.

Down the way, he saw a BattleMech with the local garrison wander around in an irregular patrol pattern. Squinting, he didn't recognize the boxy shape, and figured he could solve two problems with one request. Walking back into the bay, he hailed the bridge, getting his XO on the line. He explained about the 'Mech he didn't recognize, and ordered Gregor to find out what it was, what capacities it had, and then to do the same for the rest of the local garrison lance.

Soe had no goals with this request beyond keeping Gregor's mind occupied on something that wasn't trying to usurp his position, but also worded his request to make it seem like he was considering proper action against the locals.

A couple hours later, Captain Carlson was resting in a lounge at the Port while his crew went looking for tenders and other things. He had handed down the list of things he wouldn't bail his crew out of, and let them do their own thing.

He was only barely surprised when his Mechanic came up to his table, and Soe offered him a drink. Jackson had been with Soe since the beginning, and the two trusted each other implicitly. "Pleasure or Business?"

"Business, Captain."

"Oh? Do tell."

"There's this local bunch, some man named John Deere who owns the AgroMech factory out in the hills. You've seen their stuff, the green vehicles with yellow trim? Well, he's got himself some weird gig going on where his guys will train people in basic vehicle maintenance and the like."

"Yes. So?"

"Well, I did some digging and it seems like as part of this deal, they'll

give any DropShip whose crew takes their training course a free small industrial metalworking set, no more than two hundred tons in weight for support of their products. Seems they like the idea of any ole DropShip being able to act as a mobile repair point for all their gear, and from talking to some other people, it's a good side gig." He slid some papers across the table to Soe, who looked them over. "Two week course. You can even call shore leave. And we can use the equipment once its in our bay to do some repairs on our ship, fix that shower in your cubby, sir."

The promise of hot water was almost too much, but what sealed the deal was the capacity to give his crew shore leave, leaving Gregor to stew. And it would let him figure out who was more likely to support the XO than the Captain. "I'll give the orders. And if Mr. Deere shorts you, tell me and we'll make them see the error of their ways."

Control Center, Helmsdown Starport **23 September 3025**

"Sir?" The young aide approached his boss carefully. "I did those checks on the arrivals these past two weeks, and I think we have a pirate."

Mule DropShip "Semper Fi" **En route to Helm, Freeworlds League** **24 September 3025**

Major Fi strode back and forth beside the tactical table. Her bald and scarred head spoke of many combat campaigns, and this one was just the wrong kind of stink for her liking. It was a simple *demonstration* raid for her company's employers, a show of force by landing, shooting up the target, then withdrawing.

It was promised to be an easy job . Too easy, and that was the problem.

They were on standby back at Stewart when the message came in two days previously. The raid was a go, and so they had jumped in, her

heavily modified *Mule* more equipped to handle military resources than cargo now headed towards the target.

She looked over at her XO, a former direct employee with Irian who was allowed to 'retire' to her command after injuries defending Irian interests from Combine based competitors. Fi never regretted having him aboard. "Your plan?"

It was the way of the two of them. They would both examine a situation at the same time and come up with their own plans. Then they would compare notes and refine the plan from there. That they came from two different schools of combat only helped as they could see weaknesses in each others plans and fix them. It worked, and kept them in business.

"Our employers have stated that they have secured the non-participation of the local garrison, but we will need to remind our boys and girls who they can play with. Other than that, the hardest part will be getting out of the port itself. It's a mess with the increased traffic, and there's no place to land closer to the target than that that we can use. I'd recommend keeping the heavier 'Mechs back to cover us and intimidate the locals into inaction. Our recon Lance can make the run up to the target for the hit-and-run. Use one of our AeroSpace fighters for a recon run first."

"I agree." Li glared at the map tacked to the table. "The worst part is we don't know what the defences are like. There's no records of a raid made against this facility before, being an IndustrialMech facility without Fusion generators made it such a low value target..."

"Which means the defenders are untested as well. What do you think our forces will face?"

"If I were them, militia guards against infantry, plus some static defences. These hills here, here, here and here" she pointed to them on the map, "all give good coverage of the approaching road and area if they had LRMs on them. The clear-cutting to both sides would make for one hell of a kill box. Best give orders to avoid it entirely."

Fi pondered the maps before adding some more. "In fact I hate this

terrain entirely. Too many woods and not enough flat land for us to come down nearby and not involve the local garrison. Whoever built this factory made sure that it was well protected from conventional assault."

"I agree. I think we should keep the vehicles along the approach in and out of town. The Garrison might do something to keep up appearances for the locals though, even though they have their orders not to."

The conversation continued for long hours.

Freidman Manor House Outside Helmsdown, Helm

Jacob Freidman was a middle aged man with two things of importance attached to him. First was that his family owned a large chunk of land that the city was built on, though not enough to make him the equal of the Landholder, and second was his *Orion*. The venerable BattleMech had been in his family since the fall of the Star League, and together the Mech and family had defended Helm from the occasional Lyran raid, or responding to attacks on nearby worlds.

As such, his official title was Head of Helm Militia, and it was in this capacity, not as the friendly neighbourhood landlord that he sat down in his office with a representative from the Spaceport. The nervous young man had explained about his checks and revelation about the identity of a certain DropShip that had arrived in the past week. Freidman carefully quizzed the youngster about the activities of the crew of the ship, and found that they were looking for shipping contracts, as well as taking some of the offered educational courses from the Factory.

"I think you have a point. But they haven't done anything wrong on this side of the border, so we can't just arrest them. I think, then, I'll arrange to do a couple patrols of the Spaceport myself, just to let them know to keep their noses clean. They start anything, we'll finish it. Thank you."

Starport, Helmsdown

Jacob strolled causally through the warehouses adjacent to the primary landing fields. Well, as causally as a 75 ton BattleMech can. He was careful to let the small people pass safely around him, his sense of duty too much to force his way through. No, better that they see him as their rightful guardian, which he was.

The *Orion* carefully advanced into the small lot where various DropShips were parked, each given enough room to take off and land without risking damage to any other.

There. He twisted in about just a little bit to face the suspected Pirate DropShip. Oh, they hadn't done anything illegal (though he had reports of a couple bar brawls involving them, but nothing worth starting a battle over), but it never hurt to make ones presence known. As he walked by, he turned and waved at the bridge of the *Union*, then walked away at the same pace.

Inside the cockpit, he smiled. He had received a message from the Office of the Landholder, telling him that there was a mercenary company enroute to hit a "target of opportunity", and Jacob, for one, would enjoy the fireworks when they came to smash those pirates.

It wasn't like there was anything else worth striking.

27 September 3025

DropShip *Semper Fi*

Starport, Helmsdown

The *Mule* landed softly, the heavily converted DropShip setting down in the provided space. While the ground around them cooled down, Major Fi sat in the cockpit of her *Wolverine*, delivering the last of the briefings.

As discussed earlier, the lance of Light Mechs would make for the target and damage it before withdrawing. Her lance - the *Whitworth*, *Vindicator*, and *Centurion* backing her up, would secure the landing

zone and run interference.

She reminded them that the locals had been alerted to their arrival, so to check their weapons. They were not here for general mayhem, but for a specific target. She didn't want to have to pay fines to their employer for their screwups.

A chorus of affirmatives met her commands, and then silence reigned as the seconds began to count down to the start of the operation.

1 April 3027

Earth

Camp David, Maryland.

Jack Ryan crawled out from under the rubble that had once been an elegantly appointed cottage.

We were so sure..., he thought bitterly. To the south, the sky burned, a baleful glow even through the shrouding smoke and dust. A funeral pyre for Washington.

Other glows, to the north-east, marked the graves of Philadelphia and New York and their millions.

So sure...

Ryan staggered to his feet, his suit torn and bloody. Moving automatically, on the reflexes drilled into him as a lieutenant, so many years ago, he moved to check on his Secret Service escorts. In the piled rubble, lit by the fitful fires of Camp David burning and the other glow of the end of the world, he could only find one, who had shoved Ryan out of the way of the collapsing timber beam between them and the exit.

That same timber beam had fallen on Agent Hoya, crashing square across his torso. Ryan felt for a pulse, hands slipping in Hoya's blood. Nothing. Hoya's pistol, dropped, glinted dully in the eerie half-light. Ryan scooped it up and looked around.

David was in ruins. Silhouetted to the south, Ryan could make out the outline of a heavy quad 'mech; a *Goliath*, he thought, but wasn't sure. He crouched into the piled rubble anyway; whatever it was, it could end him. Reverberations from the 'mech's footfalls caused small cascades of rubble even this far away.

We thought we'd tricked them...

Toronto was a crater, a smoking hole that had spawned a never-ending horde of 'mechs and infantry. New York had died to a

crashing dropship. London, a mass bombardment. The world was dying in pain and fire.

And there was absolutely nothing that Jack Ryan could do about it. Cathy had been working at Johns Hopkins when the attack began. Ryan had been bundled out of the White House in moments, but Cathy, shoved into her helicopter by Chavez and Kelly, had left just a bit too late.

Her last words had been "I love y-". And then he'd seen the fireball.

The space defences hadn't worked. Undetected sabotage, missed in the haste of building, had destroyed most of them when they attempted to fire. Across the planet, sudden rebellions had cut communications, destroyed supplies, killed troops. Asteroids and plasma fire from space had ravaged everything on the ground.

People thought they'd believe our fiction was real...

Ryan hadn't believed it at first, but the CIA had sworn it was working; that the leaders of the Inner Sphere couldn't tell fiction from truth about Earth.

I should've known better.

The Draconis Combine had maintained a ruthless hold on hundreds of planets for centuries. They weren't *idiots*. Why had he-- why had *anyone*-- thought they would duped by, or for that matter *care about*-- something like *The Last Samurai*?

Ryan couldn't remember the reasons now. Odd.

The thudding of the 'mech grew louder. Piles of ash and stone tumbled unnoticed, caking Ryan further in grime.

The flames drew nearer, too. He began to feel heat from them, penetrating the numb shock.

Why did I ever think that?

Other strangenesses, overlooked, began to nag.

I heard about a reporter named Lois Lane.

I remember a soldier nearly orgasming when he talked of me.

I remember my kids playing Battletech... but I never bought them any of the books.

*We're fighting an enemy from a **board game**.*

That last thought burned in Ryan's head.

A board game. My wife was killed by people from a board game.

The jutting ruins of a stone fireplace to Ryan's left drew the ire of the Goliath. A sudden burst of blue light and heat enveloped it; when it was gone, all that was left was a molten puddle. The heat pulse singed the last of Ryan's eyebrows clean away.

Fed by the sudden draught, the nearby fires billowed into a full burn. Tongues of flame began licking at Ryan's clothes.

This cannot be real.

*This **cannot** be real!*

Ryan stood.

The *Goliath* was too far away to hit with a pistol. Ryan shot it anyway.

Ryan saw the 'mech stop. Snarling, he fired again and again, emptying Hoya's pistol at the hulking war machine. When the magazine was empty, he threw the pistol away and ran. *Towards the Goliath.* Everything moved with dream-like slowness. Slowly- so very slowly- the giant 'mech turned around. Slowly, the pilot took aim with a pair of heavy machine guns at the unarmed madman. Slowly, he fired.

Slowly, bullets tore Ryan's left arm away and stitched across his chest, spinning him around and dropping him to the ground. The fall seemed to take forever.

In fact, it took the rest of Ryan's life.

Then he woke up, jerking bolt upright, his heart trip-hammering. He was in bed, in the White House, beside Cathy, snoring peacefully.

Frantic, Ryan shook her awake. "Cathy? Cathy!"

"Hsnfl?", was the less than intelligible response. Another try brought a clearer one: "Jack? What is it? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Ryan fell back, shaken. "You're not far off, Doc." He paused, not entirely sure how to word the next question without sounding crazy. "Cathy... what year is this?"

His wife-- his beautiful, *alive* wife-- looked gloriously puzzled. "It's two-thousand-and-five," she said. "April 1st. What's *wrong*, Jack?"

Jack Ryan leaned back, peace flooding him. *What in the world is a Battlemech?* a small corner of his mind wondered before it was swept away.

"Nothing, dear. Just a bad dream."

THE END

3 May 3025
Earth (Motherlode)
Yakima Firing Range (WA, USA)

"Okay, run this by me one more time, and please remember my thesis was in radiometry, not advanced laser physics."

Sitting back in her chair, Doctor Indrani Kaur had to physically restrain her impulse to rub the bridge of her nose. It really wasn't that hard to explain the problem, if you knew the technical terms. While Colonel Garris was still playing catch-up, likely a couple sentences behind where she'd stopped, he was at least doing better than the previous officer she'd had to talk to. Probably because there were quite a few areas of overlap in his area of study and the topic at hand.

"Let me rephrase this. We got overconfident with the results down at Los Alamos with the extended range laser tests. We can achieve a 'low heat' state model, matching up roughly in size and volume to the three standard Spheroid models. But those were under open laboratory conditions. Controlled, open laboratory conditions."

Those last four words made Garris wince. He, like many senior officers, was more than well aware of what 'controlled condition' testing could lead to when it came time for the 'semi-controlled chaos' that was real combat. He might have not been around for the AR-16/M-16 debacle, but he had been in uniform just long enough to have dealt with the tail end of the Bradley screw-up, and had been right in the middle of helping fix the errors with the Stryker. Considering just this project alone could potentially break Earth's burgeoning mil-laser industry, they needed to know whether to wait it out, or cut bait and run, and know now before billions were spent on a broken design.

"Now that I can understand. But, before you say anything more Doctor, you should know I wasn't exactly an adherent to how everyone was rushing towards 'up-teching' our military. For all that

we consider their weapons to be hopelessly designed, they have worked for well on five hundred years, with active lifetimes nearly as long for a few we've discovered in salvage operations. So. Do we need to drop the project, trim it back to some degree, or do we keep it as is?"

"More of the latter two. It's just that when developing the low heat model, we incorporated a version of those cooling jacket systems we scavenged off SLDF units, directly into the laser itself. That and two more links to any coolant lines along with a dedicated pump for them while the laser is recharging. It was pretty much the only way we could get the heat levels down to standard levels. The problem is, that when we tested the lasers, we let them cool back to neutral before test firing again. Now if we can keep the temperatures neutral, they work just fine. That's the issue. 'Mechs and Aerospace Fighters don't run cool. Do just about anything with one, and it raises it's internal temperatures slightly, or even spiking them to levels normally seen only in your kitchen oven."

"You're still making it out like the first option Doctor Kaur, so could we get to the good news?"

"Yes well, the jacket for the laser starts breaking down if the temperatures within the unit it's mounted in exceed between a third and half of it's maximum safe levels. At low levels, the jacket starts to warp but if quickly cooled for a period of time, the materials naturally revert back to their original form. They're specifically designed to, as a kind of memory material. But if you keep the temperatures up for a long period, or outright spike them, it's almost certain to cause the jacket to buckle and 'reset' the material's memory to the warped shape.

Now if the jacket were a secondary material, like it was on the SLDF models, this wouldn't really be a big issue, beyond an escalating heat issue. But as I said, we had to integrate it directly into the laser itself. In fact, it forms part of the beam shaft that holds three of the focusing lenses. Once it starts to warp, you'll start to see the beam almost immediately lose focus, dropping it's damage and boosted range potential sharply, and accuracy will plummet even worse than that. If the jacket actually buckles, one or all of those lenses will shift

completely off alignment. At that point, the whole laser is nothing but dead weight. You might be able to use it once or twice after that, but more than likely you'll scatter part of the beam while it's still inside the laser itself, and wreck the whole thing."

Rubbing the side of his hand just under his nose, Garris nodded a bit to himself as he ran things through in his head. Kaur let him, as she could almost visibly see the wheels turning in his head, beyond just the direct implications of the problem. Considering it was up on the, very, short list of high-tech trade items to the Outworlds Alliance, this went well beyond the Pentagon and into the public sector.

"Neat. In that I understood that. Not so neat in the problems that come with understanding it. Basically what we've got is, to use grunt terms, because that is how it'll be referred to in the field, is a laser that can 'jam' much like a mis-fired cartridge in a rifle. Use it too much, and risk either blowing the range, or blowing it up. It's a damn good thing we're trying to keep as many of our designs as low heat as possible, or that our ground units are specifically designed to stay heat neutral."

"My team can, tentatively, agree with you on that. Any in ground vehicles, or those mounted on the larger spacecraft in development shouldn't be an issue. Mostly in the latter case due to the sheer amount of coolant systems available would easily deal with the issue. But for 'Mechs or Fighters, which give up heat neutrality in order to grant a massive punch one moment and then a longer wait while cooling, it could be a real headache. The good thing is, is that even if it buckles, as long as it wasn't activated again, the lenses and barrel can be saved and realigned. We made sure to over design the lenses to handle high heat loads, and the materials could be 'soaked', in very low temperature liquids, and correctly reset their shape memory. It'd require a full maintenance facility, but it could be done in a few hours or so."

"Now that is good news. Not enough to avoid the headache I'm going to get when I tell the group over at Tac Planning they'll have to rewrite their manuals, again, but it's better than what I was hoping considering how this discussion started."

"Then let me offer a further bit of stress relief. We designed the emitter barrel to have a series of snap-on/snap-off points just in front of the lasing chamber. With that, you could pull off the entire barrel and swap it for a new one with little more than a socket wrench, two people, and a winch. If one comes in warped or buckles, you could swap in a new one in minutes, while the damaged one resets in the cooling bath. There is some flash leakage though from the beam itself into the micro-gap between the chamber and barrel, but that's more of a shelf life maintenance issue. Considering we went with a twenty year shelf life and five years active at best, it probably would drop to a four year active and a sixteen to seventeen shelf, design."

"So we're still stuck with short lifespan models?"

Doctor Kaur gently waved off that concern, after sinking back into her seat a bit. The lifespan problem was something that was forever going to be an issue for Earth. It's whole mindset was so radically different than the Spheroids, who were used to driving around the same vehicles or using the same equipment their great-grandparents had bought. In fact it was already causing problems with the trading to the Outworlds Alliance in some areas. Several key advantages, such as getting far more performance out of a given design, more than offset the drawbacks, and at least one of the OWA's major engineering firms had already grasped that. So at least there was some progress, even if others were dragging their heels.

"This is the best we could conceivably get for the next decade at the most optimistic. You could throw money at us, and we'd be happy to have it, but honestly, you won't be getting any noticeable improvements on that front for a long time to come. To be perfectly clear, we don't believe we could get a 'low heat' design with a shelf life even close to Spheroid standards, until likely sometime in the mid-to-late 3040s or even the early 3050s. By then, we all know there would be far more pressing problems about to drop on our heads due to a certain invasion scheduled to kick off."

"Okay, consider the shelf life issue tabled. But we can likely continue with the rest of the project given the info you just told me, although I'll of course look over the data on the thumb-drive and have some of our analysts crunch the numbers. Yes, I know you already did, but

the brass above me live on redundant paperwork, and who knows, maybe today is the day the analysts will get lucky and actually find something different for once."